

CAIN AND ABEL

CAIN AND ABEL

BOOK ONE

Chapter 1

IN THE PRECEDING PAGES we have discussed the subject of Paradise, including the account of the fall of Adam and Eve. We have recorded these facts to the best of our ability, just as the Lord has inspired us to interpret their meaning. Now, we have it on record that this sin did not stop at that point, but, to make matters worse, lived on and had a successor in the person of one who was still more debased. Let us take note, then, of what happened subsequently, as we follow in due order the events related in the pages of holy Scripture.

(2) Adam knew his wife and she conceived and bore Cain, saying: "I have begotten a man-child through God."¹ In using the expression 'giving birth to,' it is usual for us to consider the categories 'by what,' 'from what,' and 'through what.' The phrase 'by what' refers to the material; 'from

¹ Gen. 4.1.

what,' to the author; 'through what,' to some instrument. Can the expression, 'I have begotten a man-child through God,' induce us to think of God as an instrument? Certainly not. We are to understand here that God is the Author and Creator. Hence, Eve ascribed the work to God when she said: 'I have begotten a man-child through God,' so that we, too, in a similar situation, ought not to claim our succession to ourselves, but attribute it entirely to God.

(3) 'In addition she bore his brother Abel.'² When anything is added, that which comes before it is eliminated. This we can see in an arithmetical calculation or by simple reflection. When one number is added to another, something new arises. The original number disappears and mentally we proceed to exclude the figure with which we started. When, therefore, Abel is born in addition, Cain is eliminated. This can be understood better if we examine the signification of their names. Cain means 'getting,' because he got everything for himself. Abel, on the other hand, did not, like his brother before him, refer everything to himself. Devotedly and piously, he attributed everything to God, ascribing to his Creator everything that he had received from Him.

(4) There are two schools of thought, therefore, totally in opposition one to the other, implied in the story of the two brothers. One of these schools attributes to the mind itself the original creative source of all our thoughts, sensations, and emotions. In a word, it ascribes all our productions to man's own mind. The other school is that which recognizes God to be the Artificer and Creator of all things and submits everything to His guidance and direction. Cain is a pattern for the first school and Abel of the second. One living being gave birth to these two schools of thought. Hence, they are related as brothers because they come from

² Gen. 4.2.

one and the same womb. At the same time, they are opposites and should be divided and separated, once they have been animated with the life of the spirit. Those who are by nature contraries cannot abide for long in one and the same habitation. Hence, Rebecca, when she gave birth to two individuals of dissimilar nature, the one good and the other evil, and when she felt them leap in her womb (Esau was the type of wickedness, Jacob the pattern of what is good), marveled at the reason for the discord which she perceived within her. She appealed to God to make known the reason for her suffering and to grant a remedy. This was the response given to her prayer: 'Two nations are in your womb; two peoples shall stem from your body.'³ Interpreted spiritually, this can mean the same generation of good and evil, both of which emanate from the same source in the soul. The former is likely to be the fruit of sound judgment whereby evil is repudiated and goodness is fostered and strengthened. Prior to giving birth to what is good, that is to say, to giving complete reverence and deference owed to God Himself the soul shows preference to its own creation. When, moreover, the soul is generated with faith and trust in God, relief comes at the time of parturition. Thus God, in applying the beneficial lesson of Abel to the soul of man, makes ineffective the impious lesson of Cain.

Chapter 2

(5) Following the Scriptures, I am inclined to hold that in this place we have a reference to two classes of peoples. In disposing for the Church's use the faith of His devoted flock, God has made ineffective the perfidy of the people who fell away from Him. The very words of God seem to

³ Gen. 25.23.

establish this meaning: 'Two nations are in your womb; two peoples stem from your body.' These two brothers, Cain and Abel, have furnished us with the prototype of the Synagogue and the Church. In Cain we perceive the parricidal people of the Jews, who were stained with the blood of their Lord, their Creator, and, as a result of the child-bearing of the Virgin Mary, their Brother, also. By Abel we understand the Christian who cleaves to God, as David says: 'It is good for me to adhere to my God,'¹ that is, to attach oneself to heavenly things and to shun the earthly. Elsewhere he says: 'My soul hath fainted in thy word,' thus indicating his rule of life was directed toward reflections on the Word and not on the pleasures of this world. Wherefore we realize that what we read concerning David in the Book of King is not an idle statement, but is said with due weight and reflection: 'And he was laid with his fathers.'³ We are given to understand that his faith was like that of his father's. It is clear, then, that there is reference here to participation in life and not to the burial of a body.

(6) Hence the words of Scripture here are considered to have more than casual meaning. Leaving the appearance of this weak body which was attached to his soul as an appendage, Isaac 'was gathered to his kin'⁴ because he adhered to the customs of his father. Fittingly does he say 'to his kin'—not 'to his people,' as elsewhere.⁵ We read in other places that men were gathered to their people, but these men were not so prominent. A person is more prominent who is matched, not by the many, but by the few—for there are more individuals implied in 'people' than in 'kin.' It is considered, too, that similarity to a few people has more

1 Ps. 72.28.

2 Ps. 108.81.

3 3 Kings 2.10.

4 Gen. 35.29.

5 Deut. 32.50.

merit than likeness to a large number. Those, therefore, who were born in this world with God's help, who were chosen to offer with devotion approved sacrifices, who were content with one consort, that is, with the sole society of that highest of kinship, wisdom, which is ever one and harmonious—these persons, according to the testimony of holy Scripture, ought not to be put in the category of the average man. In the one case, we have an active life which included study and meditation; in the other, association with the crowd and a mingling with the populace. Those who collectively are called 'people' are for the most part swayed by hearsay. Uncorrupted purity and lofty lineage are found, not where men are subject to popular appeal, but wherever an intelligent group is gathered together solely for the task of learning. Wherefore Isaac, we are told, with the help of God was gathered to his kin rather than to his people. Thus you can come to understand that he was a man who paid more attention to what is divine than to what is merely human.

(7) Blessed is the mind of that man who, overstepping the bounds of species and race, deserves to hear what was said to Moses when he stood apart from his people: 'Stand thou here with me.'⁶ Just as Isaac, the type of the Incarnation of the Lord, overstepping the custom of human generation, surpassed his predecessors, so that he acquired special distinction and veered from participation in the common and vulgar, in a similar way we learn from Scripture that 'promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. He does not say, "and to his offsprings"—as of many, but as of one, "and to thy offspring," who is Christ.'⁷ In Moses, also, there is a figure of one who was to teach the Law, preach the Gospel, fulfill the Old Testament,⁸ found the New, give

⁶ Deut. 5.31.

⁷ Gal. 3.16.

⁸ Matt. 5.17.

heavenly nourishment to the people. He so far exceeded the dignity of his human state that he was given the title of 'God' as we read in the Scriptures, where the Lord speaks: 'I have appointed thee the God of Pharaoh.'⁹ He was, in fact, victorious over all his passions and was not allured by the enticements of the world. He enveloped this our habitation here in the body with a purity that savored of a 'citizenship that is in heaven.'¹⁰ By directing his mind and by subduing and castigating his flesh with an authority that was almost regal, he was given the name of 'God,' in whom he had modeled his life by numerous acts of perfect virtue.

(8) Accordingly, we do not read of him, as we do of others, that he fell sick and died. We read that 'he died by the word of God'—for a God does not grow weak or undergo diminution or addition. Hence Scripture added: 'No man hath known of his sepulture until this present day'¹¹—by which we are to understand that he was taken up into heaven rather than buried, for death may be called a separation of the soul from the body. He died, therefore, as the Scripture states: 'by the word of God'—not 'in accordance with the word'—so as to make known that this was not an announcement of his death, but was more in the nature of a gracious gift to one who was translated rather than left here, and whose sepulture was known to no man. Who could ever find the remains on earth of one who has been shown in the Gospel to be with the Son of God.¹² Hence there appeared with him Elias, who was carried away in a chariot and who did not die nor was buried according to Scripture,¹³ for he still lives, being with the Son of God. We read, indeed, that Moses did die, but he died by the Word of God, by which

⁹ Exod. 7.1.

¹⁰ Phil. 3.20.

¹¹ Deut. 34.5,6.

¹² Cf. Matt. 17.3.

¹³ Cf. 4 Kings 2.11.

all things are made: 'By the word of God the heavens were established.'¹⁴ By the Word of God, therefore, there is no cessation of work, but, rather, a foundation. We are not to understand that here with the dissolution of the body we have a return to earth. A special favor was bestowed on him by the operation of the Word of God, so that to his body was granted repose rather than a monumental sepulcher.

(9) There is a clear distinction between servant and master. What is a privilege in a master is in a servant a favor. We read that no one knows the sepulcher of Moses and that Christ died and was taken up from earth to heaven.¹⁵ Christ, in accordance with the mystery of the Law,¹⁶ looked forward to the Redemption, so that He would rise again. Moses did not, in accordance with the favors granted in the Gospel, look forward to Redemption; rather, he himself was the bestower of it. Hence his sepulcher is not really known, but the sepulcher which the creature could not any longer endure has been set free, since of himself every creature makes haste to be delivered from 'its slavery to corruption.'¹⁷ No one, therefore, knows the burial place of Moses, because all men have knowledge of his life. We have seen the sepulcher of Christ, but now no longer know it, since we have come to know His Resurrection. His tomb, in fact, ought to be recognized, so that His Resurrection be made manifest. Hence in the Gospel¹⁸ His tomb is described in all detail. There is no account of this in the Law, because, although the Law announced His Resurrection,¹⁹ it was left to the Gospels in their very detailed account to give us confirmation of this fact.

¹⁴ Ps. 32.6.

¹⁵ Cf. Mark 16.19.

¹⁶ Cf. Isa. 53.8.

¹⁷ Rom. 8.21.

¹⁸ Cf. Matt. 27.60.

¹⁹ Cf. Isa. 11.10.

Chapter 3

(10) Let us complete now our discussion of the theme: 'In addition she bore Abel.' This means that Eve, who had grievously erred before, had generated designedly something superior, so as to transcend the mistake she had previously made. Unless I am mistaken, this event is made generally evident in our own experiences. When we are born we have the physical sensibility of an infant. Then follows the period of childhood, which is devoted merely to the care of our bodies with no regard for the rites or observance of divine worship. Wherefore, in order to show that Jesus Christ, clearly revolutionizing the law of nature, was born of a virgin, the Prophet states: 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called Emmanuel. He shall eat butter and honey, that he may know to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child know to refuse the evil and choose the good, he does not put his trust in wickedness that he may choose what is good.'¹ And further on: 'For before a child know to call his father and his mother, he shall receive the strength of Damascus and the spoils of Samaria against the king of the Assyrians.'² For He alone was not overcome by the vanity and emptiness of this world as one who 'humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death'³—one who was most unlike each and every one of us who trust in vain and are swollen with the pride of the flesh. Hence no one is without sin, not even an infant one day old, although he never committed a sin.⁴ And so Cain is first to assert himself when we are born. Abel, in whom there is reverence for divinity, is born after him. Evil, therefore, is

¹ Isa. 7.14-16.

² Isa. 8.4.

³ Phil. 2.8.

⁴ Job 14.4; 1 Peter 2.22; 1 John 3.5.

the first to make its appearance and next the recognition of what is good. Where there is good, there is justice. Where there is justice, there is holiness, that is to say, Abel who cleaves to God.

(11) 'And Abel,' we are told, 'became a keeper of flocks and Cain a tiller of the soil.'⁵ Not without reason, as Scripture teaches us, is Abel mentioned first in this passage, although Cain was the first born. The order of nature differs from the order given to the names themselves. What is the significance of this change of order in first mentioning the younger of the two, when there is reference to employment and vocation? In order to understand the reason for this preference we should take note of the differences in their tasks. Tilling the soil comes first in our experience. This activity is lower in prestige than that of sheep-herding. This is like the case of a teacher or leader who, rightfully as elders do, begins with principles that are older and better established. The younger man, on the other hand, is likely to prefer land which is not so old, which does not 'bring forth thorns and thistles,'⁶ and which is generally acceptable. Accordingly, Adam, being guilty of sin, is expelled from the Garden of Delight that he might till the soil.⁷ The order of nature is correctly preserved at the time of the coming of these brothers into this world. When it is a question of instruction in the art of living, the younger is preferred to the older because, although junior in age, he is superior in virtue. Innocence is later in time than wickedness. Although nearly equal in age, it is far superior in the high quality of its merits: 'For venerable old age is not counted by years nor by grey hairs but by morals, and a spotless life is old age.'⁸ When, therefore, there is

⁵ Gen. 4.2.

⁶ Gen. 3.18.

⁷ Cf. Gen. 3.17.

⁸ Wisd. 4.8,9.

question of birth, Cain should take the first place. When there is question of instruction, Abel should stand first. Who can deny, then, that adolescence and the early years of manhood are subject to the temptations of the passions? Who can deny, too, that, when a more mature age is reached, peace returns after the tempestuous yearnings of youth are passed and the wearied soul finds at last a mooring place in some secluded harbor of life?

Chapter 4

(12) From such examples as these there can be no doubt, therefore, that, although wickedness has precedence in time, yet it has the infirmity which belongs to youthfulness. Wickedness has the contributory advantage of age, whereas virtue has the privilege of that sort of prestige which a man given to unjust judgments often concedes to the just. Holy Scripture is a trusted witness of this fact in the episode where Esau, whose name is linked with those who are stupid,¹ went so far as to surrender his own birthright to his brother Jacob, saying: 'Of what use to me is my birthright?'² But the birthright which he disregarded, a man endowed with competence (as his name³ implies) made an effort to deserve. Does not Esau seem to you to be like one who was defeated in a contest? Does he not appear to you to be like a man who, believing on account of his inherent weakness that he was outclassed, yielded up the crown to the victor who, he perceived, was not affected by any temptations of the senses, which, like the dust of an arena, he himself was unable to endure? 'Of what use to me,' he said, 'is my birthright?' Among the craven there are no evidences of virtue. These

1 Cf. Isidore, *Etymol.* 7.6.33.

2 Gen. 25.32.

3 Cf. Isidore, *Etymol.* 7.7.5.

indications are first observable among men of wisdom, for mental activity serves as a means toward the attainment of virtue. As a warrior cannot exist without arms, so virtue is not attained without the practice of it. Hence the Lord says in the Gospel: 'From the days of John the Baptist the kingdom of heaven has been enduring assault and the violent have been seizing it.' And elsewhere: 'Seek the kingdom of God and behold all things are yours.'⁴ Rewards are promised not to those who sleep or who idle away their time, but to those who strive. Toil has its recompense. Although it may not be pleasant or sweet, labor provides a wealth of compensation.

(13) This is the lesson given in the Law, as we find it recorded: 'If a man have two wives, one beloved and the other hated, and both the beloved and the hated have had children by him, and the son of the hated be the first born, and he meaneth to divide his substance among his sons. He may not make the son of the beloved the first born and prefer him before the son of the hated. But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the first born and shall give him a legacy of all he hath, for this is the first of his children and to him are due the first birthrights.'⁵ What profound secrets lie in what we read, veiled in the language of mystery! Pay heed, soul, to your two-fold birth and examine the mystery found in the story of the hated wife. You will find the answer within you, if you stop and reflect. Look into your thoughts and into your emotions and you will recognize that to which you owe your birthright. Two women, in fact, cohabit in each one of us: women who live in discord and disagreement and who fill the house of our soul with their bickerings and contentiousness. One of these is called

4 Matt. 11.12; 6.33.

5 Deut. 21.15-17.

Pleasure. She is so pleasant, ingratiating, and agreeable that we have in mind to make her our associate and consort. The other one is harsh, bitter, and cruel. Her name is Virtue.

(14) Pleasure, then, is an impudent prostitute with mincing, alluring gait. She beckons with her eyes, winking playfully so as to trap in her snares the precious souls of young men. The eyes of a sinful libertine are used as a lure. Whomsoever she sees—‘a foolish young man who passeth by the corner and goeth nigh the way of her house’⁶—she approaches with wheedling words. She endeavors to steal the hearts of young men—a woman restless at home, a wanderer in the public squares, prodigal of kisses, indifferent to shame, gaudy in her dress and countenance.⁷ Since she is unable, indeed, to assume a beauty that is true to nature, she affects what is the opposite to truth—an external show of meretricious arts. Accompanied by a crowd of vicious characters and surrounded by a band of wicked men, she acts as a leader in their sinful acts. She attacks the citadels of men’s hearts while uttering such words as these as a war-cry: ‘I have vowed victims for peace, this day I have paid my vows. Therefore I am come out to meet thee, desirous to see thee, and I have found thee. I have woven my bed with cords. I have covered it with tapestry from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with saffron and my home with cinnamon. Come and let us wrestle with desire.’⁸ Here in the words of Solomon we behold the very picture of a wanton. What other than worldly pleasure is more characteristic of a prostitute who make her entrance stealthily into the house, first making tentative explorations with her eyes and then entering quickly, while you concentrate the gaze of your soul outward on

6 Prov. 7.8.

7 Prov. 7.12,13.

8 Prov. 7.14-18.

the public square, that is, on the streets frequented by passersby and not inward on the mysteries of the Law? She has contrived to trap us in a room devoted to the associations of common life by such solid chains that a person, although held in bondage, finds himself at ease there. As she reclines there she covers her body with coverlets of fraud and deceit so as to allure the souls of young men, alleging the absence of a husband, that is to say, her disregard for the Law. The Law does not exist for sinners, for, if it were present, it would not have been ignored. Hence we read: 'For my husband is not at home, he is gone a very long journey. He took with him a bag of money.'⁹ What is the meaning of this, if not that the rich believe that there is nothing that money cannot control and that the Law is something that can be sold for profit? Pleasure scatters its fragrance because it has not the fragrance of Christ.¹⁰ Pleasure looks for treasures, it promises kingdoms, it assures lasting loves, it pledges undreamed of intimacies, instruction without a guardian and conversation without hindrance. Pleasure promises a life bereft of anxiety, a sleep devoid of disturbance and wants that cannot be satiated. We read: Entangling him with many words and alluring him with the snares of her lips, she led him even to her home. He was beguiled and followed her.¹¹ The hall had all the splendor of a royal palace with walls in relief work. The floor reeked of spilled wine and emitted the odor of unguents. It was covered with the remains of fish. The flowers, now faded, made walking hazardous. Everything there was confused and contrary to the order of nature: the uproar of the banqueters, the noise of contenders, the clash of wranglers, the chorus of singers, the hubbub of

⁹ Prov. 7.19,20.

¹⁰ 2 Cor. 2.15.

¹¹ Cf. Prov. 7.21,22.

dancers, the laughter of the merry, and the applause of the revelers. There you find dancing girls with shorn locks and boys with curly hair, mingled with disgusting evidences of repletion and overindulgence, yesterday's intoxication and today's inebriation. Repeated bouts of intemperance, saturated with the odor of stale wine, made a stronger impression on the senses than fresh liquor would. Pleasure, standing in the midst of this disorder, said: 'Drink ye and be drunken and fall and rise no more.' With me the most wicked holds the first place in my estimation. The man who is not himself is mine and, the more evil he is, the more is he acceptable to me. 'Babylon hath been a golden cup in my hand that made all the earth drunk. All the nations have drunk of my wine.'¹² Who, therefore, is devoid of wisdom, let him turn toward me. My advice to those who are foolish is this: 'Enjoy the bread that is hidden and drink of the stolen waters that are sweeter.' 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die.' 'Our life shall pass away as the trace of a cloud and shall be dispersed as a mist.' 'Come, therefore, and let us enjoy the good things that are present and let us speedily use the creatures as in youth. Let us fill ourselves with costly wine and with ointments and let not the flower of our time pass by us. Let us crown ourselves with roses before they be withered. Let no meadow escape our riot. Let us everywhere leave tokens of joy.'¹³ All things are left behind here and we bring with us nothing but what bodily pleasures we have experienced. I have set myself up, therefore, as a teacher of this philosophy. Nothing is true unless it brings some good, something sweet, and something pleasant. Put your trust in this philosophy, which is the very wisdom of Solomon.

¹² Jer 25.27; 51.7.

¹³ Prov. 9.17; Isa. 22.13; Wisd. 2.3,6-9.

Chapter 5

(15) On hearing these words, the young man is wounded like a stag when 'the arrow pierces his liver.'¹ Virtue, having pity on him and seeing him on the point of falling, rushes to his aid. She is fearful that he, being human, may be intrigued, if there should be any delay, 'by such sweet allurements. 'Although you have not sought my aid,' she says, 'I have come openly before you lest this intemperate woman, who knows no shame, may outwit you in your ignorance. She sits at the door of her house upon a seat in the public squares calling them that pass by.' 'Now therefore, my son, hear me and attend to the words of my mouth. Let not thy mind be drawn away in her ways. For she has cast down many wounded and countless are those she has slain. Her house is the way to hell, reaching even to the inner chamber of death.' 'Remove from thee a forward mouth and let distracting lips be far from thee. Let thy eyes look straight on.' 'Mind not the deceit of a woman, for the lips of a harlot are like a honeycomb dropping.'² This for a time you may find intriguing, but soon you will discover that this is more bitter than poison. Time will not permit me to relate in detail her vices. I refer you to the Book of Proverbs where these are described. Do not let her outward appearance dazzle you. It is fraudulent and full of deceit, entirely lacking in genuineness and in truth. Do not be tricked by the artifices of her eyes. Rather, be a follower of him 'who cometh leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills, looking through the windows,'³ beyond the reach of snares. The bonds of Pleasure, which give delight to the eye, charm to the ear, but pollution to the mind, are evil. What Pleasure

¹ Prov. 7.23.

² Cf. Prov. 9.14,15; 7.24-27; 4.24,25; 5.2,3.

³ Cant. 2.8,9.

offers is often spurious. Truth is obscured and instruction ignored by promises of gold to come. However, 'choose knowledge rather than gold and wisdom above precious gold. It is better than all the most precious things.'⁴ I will not conceal from you the sum total of the effects of Pleasure. I should not want to conceal her ugliness or dissemble her enticements, for she lifts up and excites the mind by the eloquence of her speech. In effect, she shows all the kingdoms of the world and says: 'All these things I will give to thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.'⁵ At that point be on your guard lest you be deceived by the impermanent and the passing which tempt us mightily.

(16) The Lord Jesus has pointed out to you⁶ how you may resist temptations of this sort. The Devil first tried to snare Him with an appeal to the satisfaction of hunger: 'If thou art the Son of God, command that this stone become a loaf of bread. But he answered and said, "Not by bread alone does man live, but by every word of God".'⁶ Thus was the snare broken. Again the Devil laid another snare, this time, one of vainglory, a vice that often leads men to destruction in their hour of prosperity. 'And he led him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of a temple and said to him. "If thou art the Son of God, throw thyself down from here, for it is written, he has given his angels charge concerning thee, to preserve thee, because upon their hands they shall bear thee up, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone."' And so, although the Lord Jesus might have cast himself down without danger because of His command over the elements, yet, lest He be subject to pride, He gave this reply to the Devil: 'Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God.' In this way He taught us how to ward off the temp-

⁴ Prov. 8.10,12.

⁵ Matt. 4.9,10; cf. Luke 4.7.

⁶ Luke 4.4-12.

tations of the Devil. If a real opportunity for vainglory should thus be passed by, how much greater occasion do we have to exercise humility when we are presented with a situation that is entirely different! We should not neglect to mention the third time when the Devil attempted to snare the Lord by appealing, on this occasion, to avarice and ambition. 'He took him to a mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.' Since these things cannot endure, the expression 'in a moment of time' is quite appropriate. Wait a little while and these things pass away. Wherefore, those who follow such pursuits seem to themselves to be on a mountain top. But their position is temporary, for it is written: 'I have seen the wicked highly exalted and lifted up over the cedars of Libanus and I passed by, and lo, he was not.'⁷ Those who consider temporary things to be of prime importance seem, in fact, to worship the Devil: 'Their god is the belly, their glory is their shame.'⁸ Set your glory in God's hands who says to you: 'The Lord thy God shalt thou worship and him only shalt thou serve,'⁹ from whom you will attain not what is temporal but what is everlasting.

(17) Those, indeed, who find delight in things that endure should make their petitions in due course to Him who is the true source of all things. Those things which the Devil seems to claim as his property are not really his, as he maintains: 'To thee will I give all this power and their glory, for to me they have been delivered.'¹⁰ Put your hope in Him, therefore, who is the Creator of each and every creature, although the brevity of this life does not call for provision for a long journey. God has ordained that the Devil be given

⁷ Ps. 36,35,36.

⁸ Phil. 3.19.

⁹ Luke 4.8; Matt. 4.10.

¹⁰ Luke 4.6.

power to tempt man for a while, but not to possess him. The crown of victory cannot be attained without a contest.¹¹ The unstable must be put to the test, so that they may become just and thus merit the reward.

(18) God, therefore, assigned this office to the Devil because thereby the person involved is subject to punishment if he misuses his opportunity. Where does the man given to pleasure find his treasure if not in luxurious living? But the thrifty man, not the spendthrift, is held in esteem. Hence, follow the example of the frugal man when you sit at table. Do not by overindulgence become an object of hate: 'Watching and choler are with the intemperate man,' and again: 'If thou hast been forced to eat much, arise, go out and vomit; and it shall refresh thee and thou shalt not bring sickness upon thy body.'¹² Many are the victims of gluttony, whereas temperance claims none. Frugality in the use of wine is beneficial, but countless individuals harm themselves by overindulgence. Many are the victims of excess at the banqueting table—an excess which deprives them of the use of speech. These who are harmed by gluttony are the victims of intoxication, which, while in itself a sin, drives some men to commit sin and reduces others to poverty. Take note of the type of person whom Christ would finally exclude from heaven: 'When the master of the house has entered and shut the door, you will begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, "Open for us!" And he shall say to you in answer, "I do not know where you are from." Then you shall begin to say, "We ate and drank in thy presence and thou didst teach in our streets." And he shall say to you, "I do not know where you are from." ' You have heard what He said about those who in eating were epicures. Now pay heed to what He says about those who fast: 'Blessed are

¹¹ Cf. 2 Tim. 2.5.

¹² Eccli. 31.23-25.

they who hunger and are thirsty now, for they shall be satisfied.' And again: 'Woe to those who are filled! For you shall hunger.'¹³

(19) But do you wish to eat and drink? Enter into the banquet hall of Wisdom, who invites all men, proclaiming with a loud voice: 'Come, eat my bread and drink my wine which I have mingled for you.'¹⁴ Do you find delight in songs which charm the banqueter? Listen to the voice of the Church, who exhorts us not only in canticles, but in the Canticle of Canticles: 'Eat, O friends, and drink and be inebriated, my brethren.'¹⁵ But this inebriation makes men sober.¹⁶ This inebriation is one of grace, not of intoxication. It leads to joy, not to befuddlement. In the banquet hall of the Church there will be pleasant odors, delightful food, and drink in variety. There will be noble guests and attendants who grace the occasion. It will not be otherwise! What is there that is nobler than to have Christ at the Church's banquet, as one who ministers and is ministered unto? Attach yourself closely to Him who reclines as a guest at that banquet. Unite yourself to God. Do not disdain the banquet table which Christ chose, saying: 'I am come into my garden, O my sister, my spouse. I have gathered myrrh with my aromatic spices. I have eaten my bread with my honey and I have drunk wine with my milk.'¹⁷ The garden is the Garden of Paradise, that is to say, the place of the Church's banquet, where Adam was before he committed sin and where Eve sat before she became responsible for a deed of wrong. There you will gather myrrh, that is to say, perform the burial of Christ, so that as 'you are buried with him by

¹³ Luke 13.25-27; 6.21,25.

¹⁴ Prov. 9.5.

¹⁵ Cant. 5.1.

¹⁶ Cf. St. Ambrose, Hymns 2.23,24 (*bibamus sobriam ebrietatem*).

¹⁷ Cant. 5.1.

means of baptism into death,¹⁸ and as He has risen from the dead, you, too, may rise. There you will eat bread which 'strengthens man's heart.'¹⁹ You will taste of honey which is a delight to the tongue. You will drink wine along with milk, that is to say, with splendor and purity. This refers to the purity of simplicity or to grace which is untainted and is applied to the remission of sins. Its effects are comforting as milk is to infants at breast, who thereby grow with delight into the plenitude of perfect age. Approach, therefore, this banquet. Are you afraid that the house is too narrow and that the banquet hall may restrict you because of its smallness? 'O Israel, how great is the house of God and how vast is the place of his possession! It is great and hath no end: it is high and immense. There were the giants, those renowned men that were from the beginning, of great stature, expert in war. The Lord chose not them.'²⁰ They did not deserve to be chosen, for they had knowledge of war, not of peace. Learn, therefore, the ways of peace, that you may be chosen by God. But that you may perhaps be aware that the hugeness of His house is not without adornment and that you may find delight in serried rows of columns, 'Wisdom hath built herself a house, she hath hewn her out seven pillars.'²¹ Our Lord Jesus, too, states that 'in my Father's house there are many mansions.'²² In this house, then, you will enjoy food for the soul and drink for the mind, so that you may never after hunger or thirst, for he who eats here eats to satiety and he who drinks here drinks to the point of inebriation.

(20) But this inebriation serves as a guard over modesty, whereas the inebriation due to wine is a stimulus to lust,

18 Rom. 6.4.

19 Ps. 103.15.

20 Bar. 3.24-27.

21 Prov. 9.1.

22 Job 14.2.

by which the fleshly organs within us are heated, our minds are inflamed, and our souls enkindled. Lust serves as an uncontrolled stimulus to wickedness. It never allows our emotions to find rest. Night and day, asleep or awake, we are disturbed by its inroads. Our minds cannot function and unreason displaces reason. Lovers are made uneasy and sinners incline to more sin. Even the chaste feel its effects. The victim is overcome and kept subdued by the application of fire. Sinfulness and wickedness become uncontrollable and the devotee of sin can have his fervor extinguished only by death. Hence the Apostle says: 'Flee fornication.'²³ By a swift flight we can shun the savagery of such a rabid mistress and escape from such vile servitude.

(21) What shall I say concerning avarice, that insatiable longing, that very lust for gold which is ever desirous of more—no matter what accumulated treasure is stored away. An object of envy to all, but to himself despicable, the avaricious man is poor in the midst of riches, slighting the fact that his bank balance is large. His desire for gain is as limitless as are his opportunities for making a profit. He is so consumed with passion that the only difference between him and an adulterer is that one has an inordinate love for physical form, the other, a desire for a farm, a rich estate. The avaricious man does violence to the elements by ploughing the earth and cleaving the sea. He importunes the very heavens with his vows. He ever gives expression to displeasure whether the skies are serene or cloudy, and is censorious no matter what his annual returns are from land or sea. Here is clear evidence of his sickness of soul. Wherefore Ecclesiastes says: 'There is a grievous illness which I have seen under the sun: riches kept to the hurt of the owner.' And again he says: 'A covetous man shall not be satisfied with

²³ 1 Cor. 6.18.

money.' 'There is no end to their getting.'²⁴ If you are desirous of treasure, take the invisible and the intangible which is to be found in the heavens on high, not that which is in the deepest veins of the earth. Be poor in spirit and you will be rich, no matter what your worldly goods are.²⁵ 'A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions,' but in his virtue and in his faith. This richness will enrich you if you are rich in your relations to God.²⁶

Chapter 6

(22) You have heard the secret rites of Pleasure. You have heard, too, what we offer from our store. I considered it proper that these last be not concealed by outward trappings. I wished that they be arrayed in the unadorned words of Scripture in order that they may gleam in their own light and that in due order they may speak out plainly for themselves. The sun and the moon need no interpreter. The brilliance of their light is all-sufficient—a light that fills the entire world. Faith serves as an illumination for the inspired Word. It is, if I may say so, an intestate witness having no need of another's testimony, yet it dazzles the eyes of all mankind. Our works are not announced, therefore, to the world. They speak aloud for themselves. Lest I seem to omit what is required in the way of effort, certain essentials are in this regard quite necessary. We need to have faith and zeal, together with deeds. The three elements requisite for the expression of man's religious duties are defined by our Lord Jesus: 'Ask and it shall be given you. Seek and you

²⁴ Eccle. 5.12,9; 3.12.

²⁵ Matt. 5.3.

²⁶ Luke 12.15; cf. 12.21. Here ends the discourse given by Virtue which began in (15).

shall find. Knock and it shall be opened to you.' And again: 'Everyone therefore who hears these my words and acts upon them is like a wise man.'¹

(23) The person who zealously pursues these objectives will receive an unusual blessing. He will be like the patriarch Jacob, who eliminates all vestiges of human passion by his faith and continence. He states: 'God has been good to me and I have all I need.'² We should merit, therefore, this goodness by the exercise of our faith, our zeal, and our accomplishments. By this means the people of Israel found the grace of God which itself provided them with everything. They rejoiced in the attainment, not of the things of this world, but in their training in virtuous deeds. Let us make as our heirs those virtues which holy Abraham adopted for himself in respect to his son Isaac. He handed over his entire inheritance to one who was wise and just. He did not grant the right of inheritance to his maid-servants or to their children. He presented them merely with a gift.³ Those who are perfect in virtue receive the entire patrimony of glory, whereas a mere trifle is bestowed on the mediocre and commonplace. Accordingly, Agar, whose name in Latin means 'dwelling near' and Chettura, signifying 'fragrant,' are not heirs of Abraham. Those whose training is mediocre are neighbors of the home of Wisdom, not dwellers therein. That which has a modicum of fragrance has not reached its fulfillment in fruit. Food, not mere fragrance, is conducive to health. Fragrance is just the herald of fruit to come. We conclude, therefore, that those who are leaders in virtue are to be preferred to those who are slackers and that native dwellers have preference over those who are merely neighbors in the land of Virtue.

¹ Matt. 7.7,24.

² Gen. 33.11.

³ Cf. Gen. 21.10-13.

(24) This is a rational interpretation. But there is another, a mystical one, according to which Abraham, the father of the race, confers the entire legacy of his faith to his lawful seed which is Christ,⁴ who, like a stranger on earth, strove to restore the fragrance of this life rather than the fruit. When the mind gives heed to this meaning, it turns away from Pleasure and links itself to Virtue in admiration of what is truly beautiful, what is pure in feeling, what is simple in thought, and what is seemly in external appearance. This means that Virtue is not arrayed 'in the persuasive words of wisdom but in the demonstration of the Spirit.'⁵ Such is the nature of the apostolic message, in appearance clothed in all manner of wisdom and piety, shining forth more brilliantly, and more precious, too, than gold of any sort. Moreover, this message inculcates the grace that proceeds from that choral band of virtues: namely, Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice. Stirred in such wise, the soul strives after those virtues to which Jacob, a man of wide experience, had applied himself. Wherefore he is depicted as a shepherd herding sheep.⁶ This signifies that he was considered to have surpassingly good qualities to be able to lord it over his body and his senses, and to be able to control his tongue, lest it wander like a lost sheep—qualities which are of greater import than the power of dominion over cities and peoples. It is more difficult for a person to rule over himself than over others. To exercise control over one's mind, to restrain one's wrath, and to integrate the conflicting ordinances of soul and body are characteristics of a man who is immortal by nature, a man whom the infernal portals shall not enclose. Hence the lawgiver himself claimed this as his right: to pasture the flocks of Jethro (whose name means 'superflu-

⁴ Cf. Gal. 3.16.

⁵ 1 Cor. 2.4.

⁶ Cf. Gen. 30.31.

ous') and to drive them into the desert.⁷ This means that he compelled the irrational loquacity of one whose language was common and superfluous to enter into the mysteries of sound doctrine, for 'shepherds were repugnant to the Egyptians.'⁸ All who surrender themselves to the passions of this body of ours and indulge in its pleasures are sworn enemies of those who stand for virtue. And so in a parable Moses has informed us that those virtuous principles and deeds which foolish men avoid are offerings suitable for God. Hence Abel was a shepherd and Cain a tiller of the soil,⁹ who in foolish fashion could not brook the bright lineaments of virtue that adorned his own brother.

Chapter 7

(25) 'In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground'¹—a twofold error: first, that his offering came after a period of time, and second, that it was composed of fruits of the ground. Again, the offering was not of the first fruits. This would have been commendable from the point of view of speed and of desirability. Wherefore we have the precept: 'When thou hast made a vow, thou shalt not delay to pay it,' and 'It is much better not to make a vow than after a vow not to perform the things promised,'² for, although you make a vow, you do not carry it out. A vow is a request for a benefit from God with a promise to give something in return. Hence, when you have obtained what you sought, it would be an

7 Cf. Exod. 3.1.

8 Cf. Gen. 46.34.

9 Cf. Gen. 4.4.

1 Gen. 4.3.

2 Deut. 23.21; Eccle. 5.4.

ungrateful act to delay what you have promised. But, at times, men are apt to be heedless and forgetful of the blessings they have obtained or to become proud and haughty and claim the resulting favors as their own. They tend to refer the results to their own peculiar virtues and to consider that they, and not the Author of the favors, are responsible for their success. There is a third category of error which is of lesser import, but comparable because of its arrogance. We have reference to those who actually do not deny that God is the giver of good things, yet are of the opinion that they have obtained them as a result of their adherence to prudence and to the other virtues. Wherefore they believe that they are deserving of divine grace, inasmuch as it appear that they are by no means unworthy of such merits from God's beneficence.

(26) To avoid the eventuality of causing your whole approach to prayer to be imperfect, there is a law laid down by God, the Lawgiver, for your instruction and guidance: "Take heed and beware lest you forget the Lord thy God and neglect his commandments and judgments and justice which I command thee this day, lest after thou hast eaten and art filled, hast built houses and dwelt in them, and when your sheep and oxen are filled, and you have plenty of bronze, of gold and of silver and of all things, and when thy granaries are full, thy heart be lifted up and thou remember not the Lord thy God."³ When you are forgetful of yourself, then, also, will you forget the Lord. If you realize how weak you are, then you will discover that God is supreme over all things and you will not be unmindful of the fact that you owe a debt of reverence to Him.

(27) Now learn how each and every one of us may be warned against thinking of himself as the originator of his

³ Deut. 8.11-14.

own good: 'Lest thou shouldst say,' we are told, 'in thy heart: my own might and the strength of my own hand achieved this virtue for me. But remember the Lord thy God that hath given thee strength that thou mightest attain virtue.'⁴ Wherefore that Apostle is to be commended who, in not boasting of his own virtue, followed the Law and said that he was the last of the Apostles and that we owe what we have, not to our own merits, but to divine grace.⁵ He said: 'What hast thou that thou hast not received? If thou hast received it, why dost thou boast as if thou hadst not received it?'⁶ Here is the lesson of humility rather than of arrogance. You should strive, therefore, to be industrious rather than be powerful. Here is advice that is salutary. Do not, then, make light of the experience of a surgeon who makes a deep incision so as to rid a wound of all infection.

(28) The man who justifies himself, lest he be puffed up with the swelling of his heart, has hearkened also to the salutary mandate of the oracle: 'Say not in thy heart, when the Lord thy God shall bring to destruction those nations in thy sight: Because of my justice hath the Lord brought me in to possess this land, whereas the Lord will destroy these nations before thy face for their wickedness. It is not for thy justices nor the uprightness of thy heart that thou hast gone in to possess that land, but because of the wickedness of the nations, the Lord will destroy them from thy sight and will accomplish his testament which he promised by oath to thy fathers.'⁷ The testament referred to is the perfect grace of God. God gives nothing that is imperfect. Perfect is virtue and perfect, too, the works of virtue. This testament is one which brings with it a legacy of what is good. Rightly,

⁴ Deut. 8.17,18.

⁵ Cf. 1 Cor. 15.9,10.

⁶ 1 Cor. 15.4,7.

⁷ Deut. 9.4,5.

too, is this testament called divine, because what is really and truly good is bestowed on us and granted to us by celestial mandate. And the testament referred to is one that is old in type but new in truth, because it is sealed in blood. By this testament we hold the pledge of divine grace: 'For God so loved this world that he delivered his only Son for us all.'⁸ Wherefore the words of the Apostle points to the perfection of grace: 'How can he fail to grant us also all things with him?''⁹

Chapter 8

(29) Swiftmess of fulfillment is the primary characteristic of a vow. Hence Abraham, when he was commanded to offer his own son as a sacrifice, did not, like Cain, fulfill the command after a period of time, but, 'arising early in the morning he harnessed his ass, took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac and cut wood for a holocaust. Then he set out on his journey and on the third day came to a place which God had indicated to him.'¹ Take note first of the speed, haste, and eagerness of the expectant sacrificer. He was delayed only by the time it took to listen to the oracle, to harness his ass, so as to comply with God's commands and make the necessary preparations for the sacrifice. He was able, also, to lead away his victim to the accompaniment of the two virtues of faith, namely, certainty in the power of God and confidence in His goodness.

(30) Something can be said in reference to the time element, that is, 'the third day.' Abraham's purpose needed the quality of continuity and perpetuity, for time is tripartite, taking in, as it does, the past, the present, and the future.

⁸ John 3.16.

⁹ Rom. 8.32.

¹ Gen. 22.3,4.

By this we are admonished that there should not be any trace of forgetfulness of the beneficence of God whether in the past, present, or future. We should, rather, be steadfast in the recollection of His grace and in our compliance with His command. Another reason for this reference to time lies in the fact that the person who performs a sacrifice ought to put his trust in the brilliant light of the Trinity. For him whose sacrifice is grounded in faith has ever around him the light of day. For him there is no night. So in Exodus Moses says: 'We will go three days' journey to sacrifice unto the Lord our God.'² Elsewhere, too, when God appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre, we are told that 'Abraham raised his eyes and saw three men standing at a distance from him. As soon as he saw them he ran to the entrance of the tent door to meet them and bowed down to the earth and said: My Lord, if I have found favor with you.'³ He beholds three and one he adores. He offers three measures of fine flour.⁴ Although God is immeasurable, He nevertheless holds the measure of all things, as it is written: 'Who hath measured the waters in his hand and weighed the heavens with his palm and the bulk of the earth in the hollow of his hand?'⁵ The holy patriarch, therefore, offered sacrifice in the secret recesses of his heart to the Trinity made perfect in each of the Persons. This is the spiritual meaning of the measures of fine flour. This is the measure of fine flour mentioned in the Gospel which was ground by the woman who 'will be taken.' 'One will be taken; the other will be left.'⁶ The Church 'will be taken'; the Synagogue 'will be left,' or the man of good conscience will be taken and the man of bad conscience, left. That you may know that Abraham believed

² Exod. 3.18.

³ Gen. 18.2,3.

⁴ Cf. Gen. 18.6.

⁵ Isa. 40.12.

⁶ Matt. 24.41.

in Christ, we read: 'Abraham saw my day and was glad.'⁷ He who believes in Christ believes, too, in the Father, and who believes in the Father believes, too, in the Son and Holy Spirit. There were three measures, therefore, and one substance of fine flour. This means that there was one sacrifice which was offered to the Blessed Trinity with an equal measure of devotion and a corresponding plenitude of piety.

(31) There is still another example of speedy and zealous devotion. We read: 'He ran and picked out a good tender bullock and gave it to the servant who hastened to prepare it.'⁸ Everywhere we find devotion that is ready and eager and, hence, an acceptable gift to God. In another passage we are recommended to anticipate the sunrise with a prayer: 'Run to meet the rising of the sun.'⁹ There is the incident¹⁰ in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus, saying: 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down.' And he who attained his wish to see Christ and who further succeeded in being seen and addressed by Christ made haste to descend and welcomed Him with joy. And so the Lord approved of this display of his emotions and was quick to reward him in return, saying: 'Today salvation has come to this house.' The Lord hastened to perform His act of kindness. He did not wait and promise to fulfill it later, but first acted and then spoke of it, for He said: 'Salvation has come,' which was, of course, the act of one who anticipates, not of one who promises. The just man gives an added force to his vow by acting quickly. Accordingly, our fathers ate the paschal lamb in haste, girding up their reins, and with shoes in their feet, and standing ready equipped for departure.¹¹ The Pasch is the passage of the Lord from passion to the exercise of virtue. It is called the

⁷ John 8.56.

⁸ Gen. 18.7.

⁹ Wisd. 16.28.

¹⁰ Luke 19.5,9.

¹¹ Cf. Exod. 12.11.

Pasch of the Lord because the truth of the Passion of the Lord was then indicated in the type of the lamb, and its benefits are now being observed.

(32) Go quickly, then, my soul, in search of this, in order that you may quickly hearken unto it as did Jacob: 'How did you find it so quickly, my son?'¹² To which Jacob, following instructions, replied: 'The Lord your God let me come upon it.' God gives quickly: 'For he spoke and they were made; he commanded and they were created.'¹³ The Word of God is not, as a certain writer maintains,¹⁴ something achieved, but rather being achieved, as it is written: 'My father works even until now and I work.'¹⁵ The Word of God came before all things. It exists before all things like the Father and is in every respect like the Father, penetrating all things. It is strong, and keen, keener than any sword, extending even to the division of the soul and spirit, of joints, also, and of marrow, a discernor of the thoughts of all.¹⁶ Apropos of this, God the Father says: 'Thou shalt presently see whether my word shall come to pass or not.'¹⁷ Wherever God is, there is the Word, as He said: 'We will come to him and make our abode with him.'¹⁸ You may read elsewhere concerning God: 'I stood here before thee.'¹⁹ And so the Word said: 'Before thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee.' It was said of the Word, that is, of the Son of God, that 'in the midst of you there stands one whom you do not know.'²⁰ Wherever there are holy men, there stands the Word of God in their midst, penetrating their inmost hearts and filling

¹² Gen. 27.20.

¹³ Ps. 32.9.

¹⁴ Cf. Philo, *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* 18.

¹⁵ John 5.17.

¹⁶ Cf. Heb. 4.12.

¹⁷ Num. 11.23.

¹⁸ John 14.23.

¹⁹ Exod. 17.6.

²⁰ John 1.48,26.

the sea and the land. When the Word is here, it is elsewhere, also, without a change of place. Every place is surcharged with the presence of the Word. That which penetrates everything and is in everything leaving no place vacant—that exists everywhere. Where now the Word is present had before been possessed by the Word, and contrariwise. Hence, when a man is aware of the celerity of the Word of God, he is quick to make a petition and as quickly attains his wish.

Chapter 9

(33) Take the example of Pharaos, a man given to vain empty thoughts. His land of Egypt was afflicted with a plague of frogs. They gave forth a surfeit of sound, meaningless and senseless. Moses said to Pharaos: 'Set me a time when I shall pray for thee and for thy servants and for thy people that the Lord may exterminate the frogs.' Pharaos, who because of his plight should have besought him to offer prayer, replied: 'Tomorrow,'¹ thus showing himself indifferent to the punishment that the delay would bring, although he was still intent on saving Egypt from the plague. And so, when his prayer was finally granted, he was unmindful of gratitude. Being puffed up in his heart, he forgot God.

(34) Prayer is made effective by humility. We have the parable of the Pharisee, who in his prayer enumerated his fasts as acts of commendation and who seemed to reproach God as he boasted of his virtuous life. The publican, on the other hand, 'standing far off, would not so much as lift his eyes to heaven but kept striking his breast, saying: O God, be merciful to me the sinner!' Hence, in the words of holy Scripture, he was preferred before the other: 'This man went

¹ Exod. 8,9,10.

back justified rather than the Pharisee.² He is justified who confesses his own sin, as the Lord Himself has said: 'Tell if thou hast anything to justify thyself.'³ And David said: 'A sacrifice to God is an afflicted spirit.' Again: 'A contrite and humble heart God does not despise.'⁴ Jeremias also says: 'The soul in anguish and the troubled spirit cries to thee.'⁵ The Assyrian, like Pharaoh, said: 'Who are they among the gods of the nations that have delivered the country out of my hand, that your God will deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?'⁶ They were cast down from their exaltation. The just man, like Jacob, acknowledges that all good things of whatever sort which he has obtained come from God the Creator, saying that all he saw was for his benefit: 'The Lord thy God has given these into my hands.'⁷ This is an example of how one should accept the fulfillment of a prayer. David says: 'Offer to God the sacrifice of praise and pay thy vows to the most high.'⁸ To praise God is to offer Him a prayer and to give thanks for its fulfillment. Wherefore preference above all the other lepers is to be given to the Samaritan, who alone of the ten cured of leprosy returned, according to the Lord's injunction, to give thanks and glorify Christ. Of him did Jesus say: 'Has no one been found to return and give thanks to God except this foreigner?' And He said to him: 'Arise and go thy way, for thy faith has saved thee.'⁹

(35) Furthermore, a vow or a prayer is commendable to the extent that its substance is not divulged. We should keep intact the hidden mysteries just as Abraham did when he

² Luke 18.10-14.

³ Isa. 43.26.

⁴ Ps. 50.19.

⁵ Bar. 3.1.

⁶ 4 Kings 18.35.

⁷ Gen. 27.20.

⁸ Ps. 49.14.

⁹ Luke 17.14-19.

caused loaves to be baked under the ashes.¹⁰ This our fathers did, too, when they made into loaves, like those which in Greek are called 'covered,' the dough that was brought out of Egypt.¹¹ They covered this dough with ashes, an act like that which the woman in the Gospel performed when she buried leaven in three measures of wheat until the whole was leavened.¹² Therein is a profound lesson. Our Lord's teaching on prayer is revealed to us more clearly in the Gospel: 'But when thou prayest, go into thy room and closing the door, pray to the Lord in secret and thy Father, who sees in secret, will reward thee. But in praying do not multiply words.' And He adds: 'For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'¹³ Your room is the secret place of your heart and soul. Enter into this room, that is, enter into the depths of your soul, remove yourself entirely from the exterior vestibule, and close your door.

(36) What is meant by the phrase 'your door'? 'Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth and a door around my lips.'¹⁴ Paul makes a prayer for himself when he says: 'That God may open the door of his Word for me to announce the mystery of Christ.'¹⁵ Appropriate for the occasion was the substance of his prayer. In preaching the Gospel he was clearly chosen to be the one who opened the door of the Word, from which issued the salvation of the Gentiles and life itself for all people. We should, however, close this door lest sin enter in and that from our tongue should issue no unseemly word. Sin enters in when we open our mouths to utter what is unrighteous. How does sin find entrance? We

10 Cf. Gen. 18.6.

11 Cf. Exod. 12.34.

12 Cf. Luke 13.21.

13 Matt. 6.6-8.

14 Ps. 140.3.

15 Col. 4.3.

read: 'In the multitude of words you shall not escape sin.'¹⁶ When a multiplicity of words has come forth, sin has found an entrance, for in this very multiplicity of words what we utter is not in the slightest degree subject to measure. Because of lack of prudence we fall into error. In fact, to give expression to our thoughts without duly weighing our words is in itself a grave sin.

(37) For that reason be not imprudent in your speech. The lips of the imprudent man furnish an occasion for evil. Do not be given to self-praise: 'The prayer of him that humbleth himself has pierced the clouds.'¹⁷ Do not be incautious and reveal the mysterious import of the Lord's prayer. Do you not know how serious it is to commit sin in the act of saying a prayer at the very moment when you are looking for a favor? The Lord has assured us that we are subject to sins of speech when He says: 'And may his prayer be turned to sin,'¹⁸ unless you regard this to be of slight concern to you. To believe that your prayer is not heard unless you cry out aloud is to distrust the power of God. Your deeds, your loyalty, your affections, your passions, all cry out. Your blood, too, cries out as in the case of Abel, a man gives to goodness, concerning whom God spoke these words to Cain: 'The voice of your brother's blood cries to me.'¹⁹ He who cleanses you from your secret sins hears you in secret.²⁰ We cannot hear a person unless he speaks. Our thoughts, not our words, reach God. To realize this you have only to read what the Lord Jesus said to the Jews: 'Why do you harbor evil thoughts in your hearts?' These are the words, not of one who raises a question, but of one who

¹⁶ Prov. 16.19.

¹⁷ Cf. Eccle. 10.12; 35.21.

¹⁸ Ps. 108.7.

¹⁹ Gen. 4.10.

²⁰ Cf. Ps. 18.13.

knows. The Evangelist makes this clearer when he says: 'Jesus knew their thoughts.'²¹ What the Son knows, therefore, is known also by the Father. In this case you are aware that the Son knew. We have testimony elsewhere of the Son's participation in the Father's counsel: 'For your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'²² Let the Holy Spirit furnish heat to cook the loaves under the ashes. Do in like manner to the passions of your soul, using the heat of the Word. Although your passions, because you have come lately, perhaps, from the land of Egypt, are somewhat intemperate, cover them up and cook them, as it were, under slow heat, lest they be unable to endure a greater heat and thus be half-burned rather than cooked. There are many examples which illustrate the point that what is ill-cooked is displeasing and that what is well-cooked is pleasing. Cherish in your hearts the profound mysteries, lest you entrust to weak and unreliable ears sentiments which are rudely conceived or not well matured. In this way your hearers are likely to take warning and to recoil with horror. But, if they find that these sentiments have a certain maturity, they can derive an element of sweetness from this food of the spirit.

(38) The Lord Jesus has shown you the goodness of a father who knows how to bestow good gifts, in order that you may find it opportune to ask what is good of Him who is good.²³ He has urged us to pray frequently, not in a series of outbursts, but by praying persistently and frequently.²⁴ It often happens that a long petition is packed with empty phrases and that one which is intermittent is fraught with infelicities. Hence He warns us that, when we plead for

²¹ Matt. 9.4; Luke 6.8.

²² Matt. 6.8.

²³ Cf. Luke 11.13.

²⁴ Cf. Matt. 26.41.48.

leniency for ourselves, we should be conscious that this is the moment especially when we should be generous to others, thus commending our prayer by actual deeds.²⁵ The Apostle also teaches us that men should pray without wrath or contention,²⁶ so that our petition may not be characterized by emotional disturbance. He teaches us that we should pray everywhere, although the Saviour says: 'Go into thy room.'²⁷ But we must understand that the reference here is not to a room surrounded by walls for the shelter of our person. We are, rather, to understand a room within us in which to house our thoughts and our perceptions. This habitation for our prayers is everywhere with us—a secret place known only to God.

(39) You are instructed above all to pray for the people, that is, for all men,²⁸ for all members of your family, which is a conspicuous sign of mutual love. If you make a petition for yourself, then you pray merely for your own satisfaction. If everyone were thus to make a petition just for himself, he would become, not a petitioner, but an intercessor for favors. We conclude, therefore, that a petition for oneself is restricted to the person petitioning, whereas a petition for all men includes oneself, as you are a part of that number. Hence, great is the recompense wherein all men are accorded the benefits acquired by the prayers of each individual of the group. In this there is no question of presumption. Rather, it is much more the reflection of a humble heart, bestowing benefits more abundantly.

²⁵ Cf. Matt. 18.33-35.

²⁶ Cf. 1 Tim. 2.8.

²⁷ Matt. 6.6.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Tim. 2.1.

Chapter 10

(40) But it is now time to turn our attention to another point which we have made concerning Cain. We have noted that his delay in carrying out his vow was an indication of his negligence and presumption. The petition, in fact should be made early, lest we appear to rely on human arts, that is to say, on the skill of the art of medicine, thus hoping to obtain a remedy from the juices of plants rather than request God's assistance. We should, first of all, flee to Him who has the power to heal the passions of our souls. Men, on the contrary, invert the order of their request for aid by appealing first to men and afterward, when human assistance fails them, their next step is to make to God an appeal for favors.

(41) Having thus disposed of that charge against Cain, let us now discuss another fault in the performance of his sacrifice. He made 'an offering of the fruit of the ground,'¹ whereas he owed to God the first fruit of his crop. In this way he claimed the first fruit for himself and the remainder he left to God. Hence, inasmuch as the soul should be preferred to the body, just as the master should be placed over the servant, the soul's first fruits should take precedence over what the body offers. The first fruit of the soul are the primary emotions which are associated with all good thoughts and acts. Although these emotions come later in time than the first fruits of the body, which include nutrition, growth, sight, hearing, touch, smell, voice—both soul and body have a share in mind and sense—still, as senses, they exist prior to man's acts. To make an offering of thanksgiving to God with pure heart and tongue is in itself an expression of a primary act.

(42) These were the gifts made by Abel. God had regard

¹ Gen. 4.3.

for his offerings² because they came from the first fruits and, moreover, from the firstlings of the sheep, those which were fat and sleek. Note the fact that the offering was composed of living beings, not inanimate things. What is living, since it is very closely related to what has a spirit, is more important than what is earthly. The significance lies in the fact that the living thing comes first and that next it is endowed with spirit. The living being breathes and has a vital spirit. This is not true of the fruits of the earth. Again, note that he offered not seconds, but firsts—not lean animals, but fat ones. These are the sort of animals recommended and commanded by the Law, as related in the Scriptures: ‘And when God shall have brought thee into the land of the Chanaanite, as he swore to thy fathers and shall give it to thee. And thou shalt set apart all male animals that openeth the womb for the Lord, and all that is first brought forth of thy cattle and thy flocks. Whatsoever shall be born thee of the male sex, consecrate to the Lord. The firstborn of an ass thou shalt change for a sheep, and if thou doth not change it, thou shalt redeem it.’³ Consider the profound mysteries and the wealth of wisdom imbedded in these words which in their simplicity convey to us an abundance of grace of the spirit! The Chanaanites are people who are restless and uneasy. When you enter into their land and notice how they are devoid of morals as a result of their levity, uneasiness, and instability, then you have an occasion to show your constancy. Do not be disturbed by any trifling argument or flightiness of speech. These are the characteristics of the Chanaanite, inconsistency in language, emotional instability and restless contention. Be calm and present to them a tranquillity and serenity of mind and soul. Be like one who escapes the storms of the sea by casting anchor in a safe harbor.

² Cf. Gen. 4.4.

³ Exod. 13.11-13.

(43) The attainment of this goal is promised to you by the Lord. You are confirmed in your constancy by His assurance, which may be likened to an oath. But God does not solemnly swear because He has need of a believer's trust or because, deprived of the confirmation of witnesses, He requires the aid of an oath. He does not act as human beings do. We bind ourselves by a solemn oath to swear to tell the whole truth. God's very utterance inspires trust. His speech is a solemn oath. God is to be trusted, but not because of an oath. Rather, the oath is to be trusted because of God. Wherefore, then, does Moses speak of God as if He were in the act of taking an oath? Because we, as mortals, are bound by limitations. We wrap ourselves in the folds of public opinion as a sea-urchin does in his shell. We act like a snail who cannot breathe in the free air of heaven unless he is protected by his shell. We behave in a similar manner because we are cabined and confined in the earthy recesses of human custom. Wherefore, since we tend to believe that to be true which is confirmed by a solemn oath, lest we should falter in our trust, the same action is ascribed to God, who Himself does not take an oath, but is the avenging judge of those who commit acts of perjury. Hence it is written: 'The Lord has sworn and he will not repent: you are a priest for ever.'⁴ He has assuredly kept His oath. He has given us a High Priest for ever, in order that you may know that there is a sanction for your oath and that an act of perjury will have its avenger in Him who does not deceive.

(44) Expelling, therefore, all uneasy and disturbing thoughts from your mind and heart, God will give you free and complete ownership, so that you may till the soil in full security. You will be able to reap a harvest therein and not permit the people of Chanaan to gain entrance, that is to say, you will

⁴ Ps. 109.4; Heb. 5.6; 7.17.

be able to avoid all offensive emotions. You will pluck out by root the vices of the Gentiles. You will overturn their groves by which truth is overshadowed and in which the clear vision of celestial knowledge is obscured by the dread darkness of disputation.

(45) But you cannot attain this condition without the assistance of God. Therefore He said: 'He shall give it to thee,'⁵ that is to say, He will give you thoughts that are on the highest plane, counsels that lead to peacefulness, and ideas that bring tranquility. When He has granted these favors, you will set apart all that opens the womb and sacrifice it to the Lord. God, although He has given you everything, does not exact anything from you. He has bestowed much in abundance for the use and support of men. There is no question of God's participations in an act of nature such as eating, drinking, sleeping. These and other functions of the body were granted to you freely by God. They are not in the nature of favors. However, thoughts that are holy are the gifts of God and are inspired by His grace. On the other hand, ordinary natural and human acts 'do not defile a man, but it is what comes out of the mouth.'⁶ Deceit, false testimony, and sacrilege are the acts which bring defilement to man.

(46) Let us make clean, therefore, the thoughts within us, so that our offering may not displease. Therein let us search for what opens the womb, that is to say, for what is just and excellent, because we owe to the Lord that which is holy. Yet we are not sanctified by carnal copulation, by conception, and by parturition, whereby the womb of a woman is opened and her virginity destroyed. Although a wife sanctifies a husband and a husband the wife,⁷ it frequently happens that a woman's womb is opened without the sanctification of

⁵ Exod. 13.11.

⁶ Matt. 15.11,18.

⁷ Cf. 1 Cor. 7.14.

wedlock. Again, it is not a question of sanctification being confined solely to the husband. The wife, too, partakes in it. The natural functions of each sex are distinct in the act of conception. The husband and wife contribute what is right and proper to the sex of each. The wife furnishes the generation of human succession, a function which is outside the province of a husband.

(47) If such, therefore, be our experience in the flesh, let us turn to an examination of what is proper to the soul. There is no question that we have to deal here with something that is without sex, yet it fulfills all the offices of both sexes in that the soul conceives and, as in marriage, gives birth. Nature provides woman with a womb in which a living person is brought to birth in the course of time. Such, too, is that characteristic of the soul which is ready to receive in its womb-like recesses the seeds of our thoughts, to cherish them and to bring them forth as a woman gives birth to a child. This and no other is the meaning of the words of Isaias: 'We have conceived and brought forth the spirit of salvation.'⁸ Some of these conceptions are associated with the female sex, such as malice of thought, petulance, sensuality, self-indulgence, immodesty, and other vices of that nature which tend to enervate the traits associated with what is distinctively masculine. These last are the virtues of chastity, patience, wisdom, temperance, fortitude, and justice, which make it possible for our minds and bodies to struggle with zeal and confidence in our pursuit of virtue. These are the conceptions to which the Prophet Isaias referred in the words, 'We have conceived and brought forth the spirit of salvation,' that is to say, the characteristic masculine traits conceived and gave birth to the spirit of salvation.

⁸ Isa. 26.18.

BOOK TWO



OUR SOULS SHOULD NOT ONLY CONCEIVE, but should bring forth, after the allotted days are fulfilled, offspring such as these, lest the judgment day find us still-born. Of these births the Lord has said: 'Woe to those who are with child or have infants at the breast in those days!'¹ This birth should come to pass early in our lives. Our thoughts should be accompanied by a series of good works, so that our last days may find nothing imperfect or leave anything incompletely moulded in the anvil of our life's work. Make haste, therefore, and let your soul put your conceptions into form, bring them forth in good time, and quickly give sustenance to the offspring.

(2) The form and importance of this offspring is demonstrated in the words of the Apostle: 'My dear children, with whom I am in labor again until Christ is formed in you.'² This is the form into which the whole contents of our minds should be poured and Christ should appear conspicuously in the life-giving womb of our souls. Our offspring should be faith and our sustenance, the precepts of Wisdom. With these precepts the infancy of our heart should be imbued, its boyhood be instructed, its youth be rejuvenated, and its

¹ Luke 21.23.

² Gal. 4.19.

old age grow old and grey: 'A spotless life is old age.'³ That old age of the soul is good when no stains of perfidy have stained it. Hence Paul defends his offspring from this stain—'through the Gospel did I beget you,'⁴ he says—lest a gust of wind of false doctrine may severely affect them in their infancy. The Apostle brought into being, therefore, masculine thoughts. He yearned to bring to perfect manhood in the unity of the faith the people whom he instructed how to attain, in the recognition of the Son of God, 'the mature measure of the fullness of Christ.'⁵ He knew that the sacrifice was an acceptable one to God, for we read in the Scriptures: 'Thou shalt set apart all that openeth the womb for the Lord.' To this he added: 'All that opens the womb of thy castle and of thy herds whatsoever thou shalt have of the male sex, thou shalt consecrate to the Lord,'⁶ so that no detail be missing and everything be made clear.

(3) The Apostle had spoken of the offspring of the better sort, that is, all that is associated with and is capable of reasoning. To this category he now added those of the common crowd whose concern is with what might be called perceptions of a lowlier kind. These are compared to cattle, devoid of reasoning power. However, these last, when directed by a righteous ruler, are easily tamed to follow his commands. They are trained to endure the yoke and to quicken their pace, to stop and turn aside at the words of their master. They become accustomed to perform and undertake any task which they are bidden to do as part of their daily routine of service. In this way, nature is overcome by the power of discipline. Those animals which do not have a share in our substance nevertheless recognize the words of command we

³ Wisd. 4.9; cf. Cicero, *Pro Archia* 7.16.

⁴ 1 Cor. 4.15.

⁵ Eph. 4.13.

⁶ Exod. 13.12.

give. While they are not themselves possessed of reason by nature, they assume by a sort of transfer the reasoning powers that we have in our own nature. We see horses which are aroused to action by the enthusiasm of the crowd, which rejoice in applause and pleasure in being petted by their master.⁷ We perceive that fierce lions lay aside their natural ferocity and at command assume an air of submission. They throw off their wild natures and adopt our manners and, although they are themselves objects of terror, they learn even to have fear. A dog is slain to inspire fear in a lion. The animal who is aroused to anger because of injury to himself is curbed by beholding one inflicted on another, whereby his will is broken. How often it happens that they learn to endure hunger even at the sight of their favorite food! How often through fear of their master do they under quick and unexpected orders refrain from food even when their jaws are ready to devour it! Thus they become oblivious of their own wills while complying with ours. How different from those wild animals or those herds of horses or flocks of any kind which run wild without anyone to control them! Deprived of any guidance or direction, they give free vent to their wild nature. This is the reason for placing herdsmen, shepherds, and guard of all sorts in charge of animals. Each one performs his individual duty, directing his charges in accordance with the type of animal committed to his care.

(4) We see, therefore, that man is governed by two sorts of emotion, one that is under control and the other uncontrollable. In the latter case man rushes headlong, carried away by his animal nature, which itself lacks stability and co-ordination, into physical pleasures which are devoid of reason. In the former instance man's emotions are disciplined, subject, as it were, to the guidance and moderating

⁷ Cf. Virgil, *Georgics* 3.185,186.

influence of a leader. Whenever man's nature is under control, there it shows itself to be masculine and perfect. When, however, man's nature acts without a ruling force, there we find evidence of what might be called a domination exercised and imposed on man by the meaner sort. Thus we have a situation wherein a community which is deprived of the counsels of its king and chief citizens is subject to weakness in its body politics and wastes away its strength in effeminate action. Hence the apostolic injunction regarding the law in the members warring against the law of the mind, making a person a prisoner to the law of sin. Wherefore, in order to deliver himself from the body of this death, Paul placed his hopes, not in his own virtue, but in the grace of Christ.⁸ It is clear, therefore, that those emotions which are in accordance with the law of the mind emanate from God's goodness, whereas all other emotions are dominated by the body.

(5) Those emotions, therefore, which are morally good are the first-fruits of our senses, whereas the others are of common and indifferent stock. This classification was used by Moses, following in that respect the language of the Jews, in his reference to the threshing floor of the Law: 'The tithes of your threshing floor and of your wine-vat thou shalt not delay to pay: thou shalt give the first born of thy sons to me.'⁹ All the morally good emotions of your senses are the first fruits of the threshing floor of the soul in such a manner as grain is separated in an actual barn floor.¹⁰ On this barn floor the wheat and the barley are separated by a winnowing process from the chaff and from other impurities, while the solid parts, now rid of their lighter coating, settle on the floor. In a similar fashion our thoughts,

⁸ Cf. Rom. 7.23-25.

⁹ Exod. 22.29.

¹⁰ Cf. Num. 15.20.

when sifted, provide a solid food and pure nourishment for the exercise of virtue, as we read in the Scriptures: 'Not by bread alone does man live, but by every word of God.'¹¹ What is of no real value is dispersed like smoke or like a mist, which presents opportunities for the exercise of wickedness, while at the same time it is deleterious to one's eyes. Wickedness is rightfully compared to smoke which obscures one's vision with the darkness of this world.¹²

(6) On this subject the Lord says: 'When you are come into the land to which I bring you and shall eat of the bread of that country, you shall separate first-fruits of the Lord of the thing you eat. As you separate first-fruits of your barn-floors, so also shall you give first-fruits of your dough to the Lord.'¹³ We are a composite of diverse elements mixed together, cold with hot, and moist with dry. This admixture is the source of many pleasures and manifold delights of the flesh. But these are not the first-fruits of this body of ours. Since we are composed of soul and body and spirit, the first place is held by that admixture in which the Apostle desires that we find sanctification: 'And may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved sound, blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.'¹⁴ The first-fruit of this admixture are those of the spirit, that is to say, the creative and generating thoughts that emanate from the soul in its vigor. Only those thoughts are first-fruits which are devoid of malice and wickedness and all kinds of wrong-doing. There are, of course, certain bodily pleasures which are necessary. These are the pleasures of eating, sleeping, drinking, walking, and like functional processes. These, however, are not in the cate-

¹¹ Luke 4.4.

¹² Cf. Prov. 10.26.

¹³ Num. 15.18-21.

¹⁴ 1 Thess. 5.23.

gory of first-fruits. The Lord has put His stamp of approval, not on these, but on the others which we have mentioned, those thoughts and actions which imply chastity, piety, faith, and devotion. A clear example of this sort of thing is the offering of the patriarch Isaac. Here a father, totally immune to human emotion, proceeded to an act of sacrifice. He offered to God a clean victim and one devoid of fear and of cupidity of the flesh, although one might expect that his eagerness to offer would give way to his very real devotion as a father.

Chapter 2

(7) Let us consider the implications of the word 'first-fruits.' Should they be measured from the point of view of time or of sanctity, in other words, does everything that is first-born have the sanctity of first-fruit? First-fruits are sanctified according to the Law,¹ because therein we find the best kind of sacrifice, one which presents evidence of speedy fulfilment of a vow. Again, first-fruits become sanctified, not by time, but by devotion. The produce does not itself alone constitute sanctity. Hence, if the produce of the soil comes forth speedily without an accompanying fulfilment of a vow, an offence is committed. Not all first-born are therefore sanctified, but everything sanctified is also first-born. Hence, Cain was first-born, but not sanctified. Sanctified, too, was Israel, God's people, but they were not first in time. Yet Israel is called first-born, as it is written in the books of the Prophets: 'Israel is my first-born.'² And Levi was sanctified, but he was not first-born, for we hear that he was Lia's third son.³ Furthermore, the Levites were called first-born. Their name is derived from

1 Cf. Num. 18.8,10.

2 Exod. 4.22.

3 Cf. Gen. 29.34.

that fact, as it is written in Numbers: 'Behold, I have taken the Levites from the children of Israel, for every first-born that openeth the womb among the children of Israel and the Levites shall be mine, for every first-born in mine. Since I struck every first-born in the land of Egypt, I have sanctified whatever is first born in Israel.'⁴ Therefore, the Levites were called first-born who were preferred by reason of their sanctification far beyond the rest of the children of Israel. Wherefore, listen to what the Apostle says in regard to the first-born: 'But you have come to Mount Sion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem and to the company of tens of thousands of angels and to the first-born of the churches which were enrolled in heaven.'⁵ He has set down in order here four things: Mt. Sion, the city of Jerusalem, the company of the angels, and the churches of the first-born. The Lord took, therefore, the Levites from the midst of the people of Israel because He did not wish that they be involved in human cares. Rather, He wished to make them ministers of religion, and He set aside for Himself the first-born who open the womb of the Spirit. Hence they were not from the womb of nature like sinners given over to wrong-doing of all sorts, but are chosen for their avoidance of worldly things. Wherefore they have no part in what belongs to the crown and are not reckoned as part of the populace. They possess the Word of God in their own hearts, as we read in the Gospel: 'Where two or three are gathered together for my sake, there I am in the midst of them.' And elsewhere: 'In the midst of you there stands one whom you do not know.'⁶

(8) We realize, therefore, that above all things our trust in God should commend us to Him. Once we have this trust,

4 Num. 3.12,13.

5 Heb. 12.20,23. The manuscripts here have the plural *ecclesiarum*; Schenkl would read *ecclesiae*.

6 Matt. 18.20; John 1.26.

let us put all our efforts into making our works perfect. This is indeed a full and perfect sacrifice, as the Lord tells us Himself in speaking of gifts and contributions that are His: 'You will offer to me my oblation in my festal days,'⁷ sparing nothing, setting nothing aside, but offering a full, complete, and perfect sacrifice. By 'festal day' is meant the Lord's Day, a time appropriate to acts of perfect virtue. These acts are made perfect if our souls quell the anxieties of this world and the enticements of the flesh in a victorious struggle over pleasure and its attractions. Thus the soul is free from the world and dedicated to God, departing not even in the slightest way from the path of good intentions and casting aside all distractions, whether of pleasure or of toil. The wise man, and no one else, celebrates with due solemnity this festal day. How difficult it is for one to be completely immune from distractions of this sort! Then you may learn to know the difference between what is a masculine and what is a feminine trait, for there is no virtue without toil and toil is a stepping stone to virtue. The very words of the Law point this out: 'The first-born of an ass thou shalt change for a sheep.'⁸ The Law has established that an unclean animal shall not be part of a sacrifice, but in its place a clean animal be offered. The Law orders that the offspring of an ass which is unclean should be changed for a sheep, which is a clean animal and suitable for sacrifice. This is the literal meaning. If one were to pursue this matter further and seek for the spiritual sense of this passage, he will discover that the ass is a laborious animal, whereas the sheep is productive. This may be interpreted to mean that labor should be exchanged for produce, since the final results of work is the produce thereof. Or we may interpret the passage

⁷ Num. 28.2.

⁸ Exod. 13.13.

in this manner: Every action or labor of yours you can make commendable by the pure and simple manner in which you perform it.

(9) 'And if thou do not redeem it,' we are told, 'thou shalt kill it.'⁹ The order literally states that another animal be offered for the unclean one or be redeemed by a price, lest there be something inferior or something unclean in the tithe offering. If we examine more deeply into the meaning of this, we perceive that we should refrain from anything which is destined to bear no fruit. He who redeems does, in fact, free himself and in doing so pays off a certain amount of indebtedness. Those works should be avoided which do not lead to real fruitfulness and to good results. I refer to those works of a wordly sort which cannot long endure. These works are barren, and devoid of truth and, though they are pursued with the greatest diligence, provide nothing for the soul. All of those works that impose servitude on our souls are of no avail, even if they are not entirely lacking in effectiveness. A mighty victory can, for example, take place and the accompanying glory of a triumphal march. But we discover frequently that these same people see their previous victory now changed to defeat. The tables are turned when the issue of war finds them in the hands of their enemies. Those who were victorious before now taste the misery of defeat. It is imperative, therefore, that you direct all your labors towards God and obtain His approval. The athlete, for example, relies on his own powers, not on those of another, in order to win a victory. But then, when the spectacle begins, he inclines to doubt his chances. When he has attained the crown of victory, then he becomes aware that this worldly glory fades away more quickly than the very leaves of his wreath of victory. When a pilot brings his ship

⁹ *Ibid.*

to shore, he gives no thought to putting an end to his labors. He searches immediately for still another opportunity to work. When the soul is released from the body and has reached a terminus of this life, there is still the dubious problem of the judgment to come. What is thought to be a terminus turns out to none at all. Wherefore let us by our prayers, our purity of conscience, and our spirit of charity cling closely to our God. Let us gain His favor by beseeching Him to rescue and free us from the cares of this world as from some cruel and boorish master.¹⁰ Let the substance of our prayers be that we be released from slavery¹¹ to this world, so that we may obtain the liberty of celestial knowledge, wherein alone is true freedom.

Chapter 3

(10) What is related in the Law may be cited in support of our argument. When the Egyptians oppressed the Jewish people by condemning them to various labors, to toils in rocky or in muddy soil, the children of Israel groaned and caused the Lord to have pity on them. And He said to Moses: 'I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel, wherewith the Egyptians have oppressed them into slavery, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: I am the Lord who will bring you out of the power of the Egyptians and will deliver you from bondage to them and redeem you with a high arm and great judgments. And I will take you to myself for my people. I will be your God. And you shall know that I am the Lord your God who will bring you out of the power of the Egyptians and will bring you into the land, concerning which I lifted up

¹⁰ Cf. Cicero, *De senectute* 14.47.

¹¹ Cf. Virgil, *Eclogues* 1.40.

my hand.’¹ See how the Hebrew people enjoyed the fruits of their labor. They toiled in the mire with the hope of an eternal kingdom. Wherefore in the Scriptures the Lord took pity even on the empty toil of the Gentiles in the brickyards, a prey to filthy superstition and the pleasures of the flesh. A solid wall of faith, however, they were unable to build. Christ addresses the people as if speaking to the offspring of a beast of burden: ‘Come to me, all ye who labor, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls.’² I seem to be more fully aware of the words and the secret meaning of the Law when I read that call of Christ. He has taught us that an ass should be exchanged for a sheep or redeemed for a price. In this way we not only can exchange an ass for a sheep, that is, an animal that is unclean for one that is clean, but we can even redeem it. A deeper meaning seems to be implied in this statement. If by a sacrifice of purification and by the rite of baptism we first cleanse ourselves of the stains of our offenses, then we are prepared to redeem those very sins of ours by the exercise of good works and by the price of faith and by contrition.

(11) Our price is the blood of Christ. Hence the Apostle Peter says: ‘Not with gold or silver you were redeemed, but with the precious blood.’ And Paul says: ‘You have been bought with a price. Do not become the slaves of men.’³ Therefore, not without reason did they marvel in the Gospel on seeing the Lord Jesus sitting on a colt, because the race of the Gentiles is to Christ like a victim which, according to the Law, is considered to be unclean. Hence we read in the Scriptures that the Levites redeemed them.⁴ In this way they

¹ Exod. 6.5-8, cf. 2.23,24.

³ Matt. 11.28,29.

³ 1 Peter 1.18; 1 Cor. 7.23.

⁴ Cf. Exod. 13.13.

would be able by the sanctity of their lives and by their prayers to take away the sins of their people. Here in the figure of the Lamb we have the true Levite who was to come and preside over the mysteries. By His own Passion He would take away the sins of the world.⁵ The word 'Levite' means 'raised up for me' or 'on me he is light.' The word 'Levite' bears witness to a perfection in virtue by which the people attain holiness. He, therefore, is the expected who was born of a virgin and who came for my salvation and for the salvation of the entire world. For me He was sacrificed; for me He tasted death; and for me, too, He rose from the dead. In Him has the redemption of all men been undertaken; in Him is their resurrection. He is the true Levite. We, His Levites, He would bring closer to God so that we might pray to Him unceasingly, hope for salvation from Him, shun all worldly affairs, and finally be numbered among the elect, as it is written: 'O Lord, possess us.'⁶ Then alone is found true possession when we are not subject to the temptations of life and when we bring forth perfect fruit for all time. The Levite is one who redeems, because a man of wisdom redeems the man who is weak and foolish. He is like a physician who revives the spirit of his helpless patient. In imitation of that Physician who came down from heaven, he assuages the convalescent with healing words of wisdom, in order to point out to men the ways of wisdom and to reveal the paths of wisdom to little ones.⁷ He perceived that those who suffer cannot be healed without a remedy. For this reason He bestowed medicine on the sick and by His assistance made health available to all, so that whoever died could ascribe to himself the real causes of his death. That man was unwilling to be cured, although he had a remedy

⁵ Cf. John 1.29.

⁶ Exod. 34.9.

⁷ Cf. Ps. 18.8; Matt. 11.25.

at hand which could effect his escape from death. The mercy of God has been made manifest to all. Those who perish, therefore, perish through their own negligence, whereas those who are saved are freed by the judgment of God, who wishes all men to be saved and to come to the recognition of truth.⁸ Hence, if Sodom had fifty just men, it would not have been destroyed. If it had ten just men, Sodom would have been saved,⁹ because a declaration of the remission of sin would have rescued their souls from servitude, and the plenitude of perfect knowledge would not have allowed their hearts to be consumed in the devouring flames of lust.

(12) The reference just noted to people in large numbers has a special significance. Groups of people of like character have a tendency to lift the moral tone and to contribute to society as a whole something of their own selves, which is a contributory factor to the group's preservation. Numbers blunt the force of envy, confound wickedness, arouse men to virtue, and enhance gracious acts. No one ought to begrudge praise to another person who benefits him. The man given to wickedness often imitates the character of the person who attempts to aid him. At any rate, he reveres him and often even loves him. The same man, too, if he knows how to benefit other men, is made better by this exercise of his zeal. In that way he binds people together and increases the tolerance of citizens for each other, thereby bringing fame to their communities. How happy is that city which has many just men! How celebrated does it become in the lips of all men! How unqualifiedly blessed for ever is that city reckoned to be! How happy I am to see so many gentle and wise people live long lives, when I behold chaste maidens and dignified and elderly widows living virtuous lives! The latter constitute

⁸ Cf. John 3.16-21; Luke 19.10.

⁹ Cf. Gen. 18.24-32.

in a way a venerable senate of the Church to be revered and imitated because of their conspicuous air of gravity—a fact which is conducive in itself to greater charm of manners! My joy is not for these people themselves who are subject to the manifold ills of this world while they are alive. I rejoice, rather, that many are benefited by the lives of such people. Again, when a person like this passes away, although he has by his prolonged age deferred death,¹⁰ I am greatly afflicted for the reason that a host of younger men have been deprived of the stout defence of old age. Wherefore the demise of citizens of dignity and wisdom, both men and women, gives us the first indication that a city is destined to perish or that ruin is imminent. When this takes place, the gates are open for a flood of misfortunes. A city, therefore, in its entirety is strengthened by the presence of men of wisdom in its midst and is weakened at their departure. If their physical presence is important, their discourse, also, when it is in a high plane of serious counsel, tends to put courage in the heart and soul of each and every individual. If we add to this the practice of wide reading,¹¹ then we have a group of senators whose wise precepts and counsel constantly have their effects in that interior city which is in the heart of each one of us.

Chapter 4

(13) We see, then, why Moses called the Levites first-born and redeemers of others, since they offer to one man the mentality of old age, corresponding to his own mature judgment and usefulness, and to another grant redemption. Hence Moses indicated that the cities of the Levites in the

¹⁰ Cf. Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.395.

¹¹ Cf. Cicero, *De senectute* 11.38.

Old Testament served as a refuge,¹ because he who fled to where the living Word of God resides,² a place like a city well-protected and defended, that person attained for himself the kind of liberty which endures. If a man was guilty of involuntary homicide and if he took refuge in the cities of the Levites, no one was permitted to slay that person, provided he had his residence in those cities. In a similar way, if a person feels sorrow for a sin which was the result of an imprudent or involuntary act, the Law releases him from every penalty due to his crime, provided he remains in residence among the Levites and has no intention of leaving those instructors who dispense the commands of God.

(14) Do not think it unreasonable that men given to evil reside together with men of good will and that those stained with guilt live side by side with the godly. Those men who have been polluted with the contagion of sin have need of purification. Thus there is a certain agreement of contraries. The Levite who has relinquished the pleasures of this world is an exile from guilt. In the same way, the person who is guilty of homicide is a fugitive from his native land. There is this difference, however, that the latter abandons his people because of fear of the Law, whereas God's minister renounces all contacts with human passions and frees himself from the exigencies of concupiscence by his pursuit of virtue. This statement is not an exaggeration. In a sense, the Levite does violence to himself, so as to rid himself of bodily pleasures with consequent annihilation of his own flesh. For example, Moses slew an Egyptian and become a fugitive from the land of Egypt so as to avoid the king of that land.³ But he would not have slain the Egyptian if he had not first destroyed in himself the Egyptian of spiritual wickedness and had not relinquished the luxuries and honors of the king's palace.

¹ Cf. Num. 3.12; 35.6-8.

² Cf. John 1.14.

³ Cf. Exod. 2.11.

He considered that the reproach of Christ was a far better patrimony than the treasures of Egypt. To the foolish this indeed seems to be a reproach, but the reproach of the Cross of Christ is in reality God's power and wisdom.⁴

(15) There are, in fact, two main types of power in God. There is the power which forgives and the power which punishes. Sins are forgiven by the Word of God of which the Levite is the interpreter and, indeed, the executor. Sins are forgiven by the priest in his sacred office and ministry. They are punished, too, by men who exercise power temporarily, that is to say, by judges. The Apostle says: 'Dost thou wish then not to fear the authority? Do what is good and thou wilt have praise from it. For it is God's minister to thee for good. But if thou dost what is evil, fear, for not without reason does it carry the sword. For it is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who does evil.'⁵ Sins are punished even by people, as we read in the Scriptures,⁶ because the Jewish people were often waylaid by men of other races. Because of some offense against God's majesty these men were frequently aroused by His command. Even the person who unwittingly committed a murder was still within the ministry of God, since the Law makes this statement regarding him: 'God delivered him into his hands.'⁷ His hands, therefore, served as an instrument of divine punishment. The Levite is, then, the minister who remits, whereas the man who in the example just cited unwittingly and unwillingly struck another in a homicidal act became in fact an administrator of divine punishment. See to it that Christ is infused into the act of slaying an impious man and that sanctification accompany and be part of your attempt to abolish what is abominable.

4 Cf. 1 Cor. 1.23-25.

5 Rom. 13.3,4.

6 Cf. Isa. 13.17.

7 Exod. 21.13.

(16) The Lord has said: 'On that day in which I shall slay every first-born in the land of Egypt, I shall sanctify to myself whatsoever is first-born in Israel.'⁸ This does not refer to one occasion or to one crisis, but to all time. Once wickedness is renounced, virtue finds immediate entrance. The departure of evil brings about the introduction of virtue and the same effort that banishes crime leads to an adherence to innocence. You have an example of that in the Gospel. At the moment when Satan entered into the heart of Judas, Christ departed from him. At the very instant that Judas received one, he lost the other: 'And after the morsel Satan entered into him. Jesus therefore said to him, "What thou dost, do quickly."⁹ Why is this? Because, once Satan found entrance into Judas, at that moment there came about his departure from Christ. He is ejected, then, and banished, since the person who trafficked with the Devil could have no fellowship with Christ. There is no harmony between Christ and Belial.¹⁰ Wherefore, on receiving the command to leave, Judas immediately departed, as we read in the words of the Evangelist: 'When he had received the morsel, he went out quickly. Now it was night.'¹¹ It was not merely a question of departure, but it was one which was immediate and at night. The fact that one who deserted Christ should be connected with the darkness of night should excite no wonder. Just as the person who is received by the Devil is excluded from Christ, so on the other hand Zacchaeus, at the moment when he forsook gain, proceeded to welcome Christ. Marveling at the way Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Him, the Lord was moved to say: 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for I must stay in your house today. And he made haste and came down, and welcomed him

⁸ Num. 3.13.

⁹ Cf. John 13.2,27.

¹⁰ Cf. 2 Cor. 6.15.

¹¹ John 13.13.

joyfully.¹² By receiving Christ he got rid of avarice. He sent perfidy into exile and renounced deceit. Otherwise, there is no reason for the entrance of Christ unless vice is excluded, because He has no barter with wrong-doing. Hence He ejected the money-changers from the temple, because He did not wish to associate with them.¹³ Wherefore, being aware that he could not receive Christ if he followed his old way of life, Zacchaeus ordered his former vices to leave his home in order that Christ might find an entrance therein. While people murmured that Jesus had gone to be a guest of a man who was a sinner, Zacchaeus was right in inviting the Lord to stay: 'Behold, Lord, I give one-half of my possessions to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it twofold.'¹⁴ In this way he replied to those who said that a sinner ought not to offer hospitality to Christ. He said, in effect: 'I am no longer a publican, no longer the Zacchaeus of old, the thief and the cheat. I restore what I have taken. I, who used to take, am now the giver. I, who formerly despoiled the poor, now make restitution. I, who plundered what belonged to others, now give of my own.' Error took to flight, once Christ made entrance. Where the light of eternal light shone, there no longer existed that blindness caused by pleasures of the flesh.

Chapter 5

(17) We have discussed the problems connected with the first-born. Now let us turn our attention to the characteristic of fatness or richness of which David speaks intelligibly when he says: 'Let my soul be filled as with marrow and fatness.' Before that he had said: 'And may thy whole burnt offering

¹² Luke 19.5,6.

¹³ Cf. Matt. 21.12,13.

¹⁴ Luke 19.7-9.

be made fat.’¹ By this he means that the requirements for a sacrifice are that it be fat or rich, that it be glistening and that it be weighted with the sustenance inspired by faith and devotion and by the rich nourishment of the Word of God. Frequently we use the word ‘fat’ or ‘rich’ when we refer to something that is heavily and elaborately adorned, and to the finest victim as one that is not thin and scrawny. Wherefore we denominate as ‘rich’ a sacrifice which we desire to be regarded as the ‘finest.’ We also have proof of this when we consult the prophetic passage in the Scriptures where fine cows are compared to years of fertility.²

Chapter 6

(18) Now let us reflect on the meaning of the Lord’s words, ‘If you offer rightly and you do not divine rightly, thou hast sinned. Hold thy peace.’¹ This signifies that God is not appeased by the gifts that are offered, but by the disposition of the giver. Hence Cain, who offered a gift which was denounced, was conscious of the fact that his offering was fraudulent, that his sacrifice was not acceptable to God, and he was downcast. When ‘the mind is conscious of right,’² then there is occasion for veritable joy—a joy of the spirit—when one’s purpose and deeds are commendable to God. Cain’s sadness, therefore, bears testimony to his consciousness of right and is an indication of his failure. Again, because he offered a gift and did not in addition make a just and righteous division of it, for that reason he fell into error.

(19) There are four ways by which a sacrifice may be

1 Ps. 62.6; 19.4.

2 Cf. Gen. 41.26.

1 Cf. Gen. 4.7.

2 Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.604.

made acceptable. The sacrifice should consist of a gift, the newest of the new, or it should be dried or broken into pieces, or it should be unbroken.³ The 'newest of the new' belongs to the early season of the year and is consistent with the nature of first-fruits. Now, it has been made clear to us that this refers to those who are renewed by the sacrament of baptism. That, in fact, is the real sacrifice of first-fruits when a person offers himself as a victim and begins of himself to act so as to ensure in the future an offering of a gift that is his very own.⁴ The new faith of those who have been made new is strong and vigorous, seeking for itself an increase of virtue. The faith which is weak and slack—the faith which has the sluggish and slothful character of old age—is not one that is fit for sacrifice. We need a faith which blossoms with the lush growth of wisdom and with the youthful vigor of divine knowledge, a faith, moreover, which has the sap of ancient doctrine. There ought to be a concurrence of the old and the new, as in the case of the Old and the New Testament. It is written: 'Eat the oldest of the old store and, new coming on, cast away the old.'⁵ Let our food be a knowledge of the patriarchs. Let our minds banquet in the prophetic books of the Prophets. Such nourishment should our minds partake of, the truth of the body of Christ, and not just the external appearance of a lamb. Our eyes should not be affected by the shadow cast by the Law. Rather, the clear grace of the Lord's Passion and the splendor of His Resurrection should illuminate our vision.

(20) If you offer a sacrifice of the first-born of a sheep, a rich burned offering, then you should make an offering of those first-fruits as they are specified in Scripture, according

³ Cf. Lev. 2.14.

⁴ Cf. Rom. 12.1,6.

⁵ Lev. 26.10.

to which your faith ought to be tested as if by fire and ought to glow with the Holy Spirit. Hence Jacob cooked a mess of pottage and thus took the benefits from his own brother, who would surely have attained them by the exercise of a robust faith. One, therefore, increased in strength and vigor, while the other, who was unable to cook his own food, became weak and feeble.⁶ Let your soul acquire virtue by being burnt, as with fire, by the Word of God. See the example of Joseph: 'The word of the Lord inflamed him.'⁷ Let your faith be roasted like the ears of corn gathered by the harvesters, who choose to gather in the crop soon after it has been browned in the heat of the sun. Frequent reading of the Scriptures, therefore, strengthens the mind and ripens it by the warmth of spiritual grace. In this way our powers of reasoning are strengthened and the influence of our irrational passions brought to naught. Wherefore Esau was weakened when the bonds of virtue were loosed, while those who girded up their loins and were bidden not to eat 'anything raw nor boiled in water,' but who were ordered to eat the head of a lamb roasted in the fire, as it is written in Exodus—these men with stout and trusting hearts crossed the sea on dry ground.⁸ In the Gospel, too, the Lord ate 'a piece of broiled fish,'⁹ whereby the plenitude of His Spirit was renewed. Perhaps Esau was weak because he desired food that was cooked in water. Food which was unsuitable for himself Jacob gave to one who was infirm.

(21) Our offerings and our prayers ought not to be lacking in order. On the contrary, they should follow a precise pattern. In every case where there is disorder there is room for precision. Especially is this true of prayers and sacrifices which

⁶ Cf. Gen. 25.29,30.

⁷ Ps. 104.19.

⁸ Cf. Exod. 12.9-11.

⁹ Luke 24.42.

lack clarity unless they have clear divisions. Hence the Law commands that the limbs of a victim be cut up, for the most part.¹⁰ The Law also commands that holocausts be offered, so that the sacrifice be pure without admixture or covering. The reason is that our faith, pure and devoid of all externals, may thus become fervent. In that way our faith may not be enshrouded in dubious and false opinion, but appear in its pure and unadorned simplicity. Again, faith may be divided into suitable parts. Virtue, in fact, is such that it can be divided into several species, the chief of which are four: Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, and Justice. Let your prayer, therefore, give forth a fragrance of Prudence, aiming at knowledge of God and the truth of faith. Let it have the fragrance of Temperance, a virtue which the Apostle believed should be required of married people: 'Do not deprive each other, except perhaps by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer.' The Law commands that these who intend to perform a sacrifice be chaste for one or two days previous.¹¹ Let your prayer show fortitude, so as not to be interrupted by fear nor be affected by weariness. Pressure of adversity should make us all the more strenuous in prayer. Our supplications should retain an element of Justice. If Judas had adhered to that virtue, his prayer would not have become sinful. At what time ought we to refrain from unjust thoughts and deeds if not when we call upon the justice of God? And so the Lord recommends us to seek justice, saying: 'Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'¹² Judas did not have this justice; otherwise, he would not have betrayed his Lord and Master. Cain, too, did not possess this virtue; otherwise, he would have offered to the Lord

¹⁰ Cf. Lev. 24.42.

¹¹ 1 Cor. 7.5; cf. Exod. 19.10-15.

¹² Matt. 6.33; 5.10.

first-fruits of the soil, not those of inferior quality. So, too, he failed to divide his gifts into parts. Hence the reply: 'If you offer rightly and you do not divide equally, thou hast sinned. Hold thy peace.'¹³ You see the seriousness of the offense. Where is no division into parts, then the whole sacrifice comes to naught.

(22) One question remains for us to discuss. How much time should we spend in prayer? The Lord spent a night in prayer.¹⁴ He did this not for His own benefit, but that He might teach us a lesson. Frequent prayer tends to strengthen our wills, so that we become more amenable to God's purposes through practice, just as we may become less amenable through indifference. Exercise of this sort, therefore, is salutary. The body's strength is increased by frequent exercise. Lack of exercise tends to diminish or weaken our bodies. In fact, persons who refrain from exercise lose even that strength which is natural to them. In like manner, fortitude of the soul is enhanced by a course of exercises. The very toil expended in such practice will, in the end, turn out to be advantageous rather than useless. Let us give our souls this nourishment, which, like the bread of God from heaven,¹⁵ will, if it is sifted and refined by long meditation, produce real strength in our hearts. Not without reason is the bread described as sifted and refined, because we ought with our whole heart and soul to sift and polish for a long period of time the teachings of holy Scripture in order that the essence of that spiritual food may suffuse the very depths of our souls. Wherefore, if our faith blossoms forth in the spirit of youth, relinquishing the enfeeblement of age—if our faith should glow within, adhering to the principle of due division according to the Law, and if we acquire grace by constancy—then

¹³ Gen. 4.7.

¹⁴ Cf. Luke 6.12.

¹⁵ Cf. John 6.32.

we attain to that rich and, so to speak, unctious type of prayer of which the Prophet speaks: 'Thou hast anointed my head with oil.'¹⁶ Just as lambs become fat from a plenteous store of milk and as sheep become sleek from rich pasture land, so, too, the prayers of the faithful profit much from drinking in the health-giving words of the Apostles.

(23) If any of the conditions which we have named is not fulfilled, a sacrifice is not approved. Wherefore Cain was warned: 'If you make a righteous sacrifice, you should divide in no unrighteous way,' because the world itself, we are told, was separated into parts. Its previous condition was chaotic, for 'the earth was waste and void.' First of all, light was created and God called it by name and 'God divided the light from the darkness and He called the darkness night.'¹⁷ We read of each of the world's objects created in due order, of the firmament, the earth, the fruit-bearing trees, and the various species of animals. Lighter elements, such as air and fire, were given a higher position, while the heavier elements, such as water and earth, were placed below them. God could, of course, have commanded all to be created at the same time, but He preferred to keep them separate. This procedure we now follow in all our business affairs and especially in our social amenities. It is not sufficient to return what you actually received. You must make the return an acceptable one. To slight in any way a person to whom you feel indebted is much more vexatious than not to pay a debt at all. Therefore, it is the spirit in which you act and the very way in which you make your acknowledgment that count, rather than the material itself of your presentation. In this way, it is true, a person makes an offering which follows the pattern of correctness sufficient to indicate his

¹⁶ Ps. 22.5.

¹⁷ Gen. 1.2,3.

devotion and his gratitude. Still, such a person has not yet made a due distinction. He ought, first of all, to give first-fruits to God so as to attain God's favor. In fact, the division should proceed in the following way: What is primary should precede what is secondary, rather than contrariwise. What belongs to heaven should take precedence over what is of the earth—not the earthly over what belongs to the heavens.

Chapter 7

(24) Because Cain disturbed this order, he was told: 'Thou hast sinned. Hold thy peace!' All this is the teaching of God: first, that you should not sin, as He had warned Adam; and, second, that, if you have fallen into sin, you should hold your peace, as Cain was instructed to do. We ought to condemn sin and be ashamed of it. We should not apologize for it, because by our shame our fault is diminished, whereas sin is increased by our attempts to justify it. We undergo correction by keeping silent, whereas we stumble into error by our contentions. Let there be at least a feeling of humiliation where there is no occasion for forgiveness. Hence we have the statement: 'The just is first accuser of himself.' Elsewhere we read the words of the Lord Himself: 'Tell if thou hast anything to justify thyself.'² How great is the power of shamefacedness, which obtains that justice which the accusation of guilt has taken away! And so He says: 'Hold thy peace,' since you have no excuse to offer. You have it in your power to be weaned away from sin. The blame is not to be laid on one's brother, but the wrong-doing is to be attributed to the one who is really to blame. 'The sin returns to you,' we are told—the sin which began with you.

¹ Gen. 4.7.

² Prov. 18.17; Isa. 43.26.

You cannot plead necessity rather than intent. Your wickedness has come back on you like a boomerang. 'Thou hast dominion over it.'³

(25) This statement ('Thou hast dominion over it') is well expressed, for impiety is the mother of error and a person who has once sinned grievously is likely to fall easily into other sins. How is it possible for man to exercise control over human things when he has done violence to what is divine? How can a man who has done injury to God be good in the eyes of men? It follows, then, that other vices are found in the wake of serious implications of immorality, since derelictions, once entered upon, lead to others. You have dominion, therefore, over your own acts; you are master of your own transgressions. You cannot enter a plea of ignorance or of compulsion. You are subject to trial as a voluntary defendant. It was not by accident or by guile that you put yourself in the category of one accused of inflicting injury on God.

Chapter 8

(26) When you are admonished, then, to hold your peace, your conscience is aroused and your crimes become flagrant. What, therefore, is the meaning of the words, 'Let us go into the field?'¹ Does it mean that a place devoid of plant life² is chosen by Cain for the murder of his brother? What place was more fitting for this murder than one that was barren? Nature, it seems, had purposely denied germinating powers to a place destined for such a crime, because it was not fitting that, contrary to nature, this soil should on the one hand

³ Gen. 4.7.

¹ Gen. 4.8.

² Cf. Sallust, *Bellum Jug.* 79.6. •

share in the contagion of parricidal blood and at the same time bring forth fruit in accordance with the laws of nature. When Cain said: 'Let us go forth into the field,' his words had meaning. He did not say: 'Let us go forth into the Garden where fruit grows plentifully, into a cultivated and productive place.' As a matter of fact, we know that parricides cannot obtain for themselves the fruit of their crimes. They expend time and effort in a frightful act of impiety, yet they cannot attain their objective. They shun places that have been blest by nature's benignity. We have the example of Cain, who seems to have been afraid that a land productive of such goodly crops might be an impediment to his ghastly crime. He seems to have feared that the lushness of vegetable life with its variety of germinating fruits might by its mute appeal, even in the act of perpetrating his crime, bring back to him his affection for his own brother. The highwayman shuns daylight, a witness of his crime. The adulterer blushes to see the light of day discover him. In like manner the parricide avoids land that is fertile. How could he bear to behold the common association of plants for productivity who was face to face with one who was bound to him by relationship of blood? Joseph was thrown into a dry pit. Amnon was slain in his own house.³ Nature, therefore, by withholding her gifts from those places which were to be witnesses of a parricidal act and by her condemnation of innocent soil, makes clear to us the severity of the future punishments of the guilty. The very elements are, therefore, condemned because of the crime of men. Hence David condemned the mountains, in which Jonathan and his father were slain, to be punished with perpetual sterility, saying: 'Ye mountains of Gelboe, let neither dew nor rain come upon you, mountains of death.'⁴

³ Cf. Gen. 37.24; 3 Kings 13.28.

⁴ 2 Kings 1.21.

Chapter 9

(27) Now let us examine the reason why God, as if He were unaware that Abel was slain, asked Cain: 'Where is your brother?' But we are shown God's knowledge, when Cain's attempt to deny his guilt is offset by the statement: 'The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground.'¹ A profounder meaning may be seen here in God's exhortation that sinners do penance, for confession of guilt leads to a lessening of punishment. Hence, in the civil courts, those who deny their guilt are put on the rack, whereas an admission of guilt tends to mercy on the part of the judge. To confess his guilt—not to evade his guilt, but to admit it—indicates that the sinner humbly awaits his sentence. Admission of guilt placates the judge, whereas denial rouses his opposition. God wishes to stir you up to seek pardon. He wants you to look for indulgence from Himself. He wishes to have it made clear by your admission that He is not responsible for your wrong-doing. Those who, like the Gentiles, place the responsibility for their sins on some external force, inherent in God's decree or in His work, seem to bring God to court as one who is responsible for their sins. According to this theory, a person does not of his own will commit a murder if his actions are the result of some external force. However, we cannot condone those acts which emanate from ourselves, whereas we tend to excuse those that are beyond our own control. That the Author, not of your guilt, but of your innocence, should be made a partaker of the shame of your crime is a conception of a much more serious nature than the sin itself.

(28) Consider the parricide's reply: 'I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?' Although this reply savors of insolence,

¹ Gen. 4.10.

there is still the implication that, considering the goodness of his brother, Cain should by his actions make known his loyalty to him. Who is there to whom he is more bound by necessity to offer protection? But how could that person who did not recognize the influence of family bonds have been expected to observe what is expedient in relations of brotherly love? Or how was it possible for him to comply with the laws of nature when he did not show reverence even to God? The existence of God is denied, as if He were unaware of Cain's act. Cain shirks his duty to be his brother's keeper, as if this were beyond the bounds of nature's laws. He steers away from judgment, as if he were above judgment. Why do you feel astonishment at the fact that he did not acknowledge his loyalty to his brother, if he did not even recognize his own Creator? From these incidents in Scripture we learn the lesson that faith is the root of all virtues. Wherefore the Apostle says: 'Our foundation is Christ' and whatever you build on this foundation is uniquely profitable and conducive to reward for virtuous acts.²

(29) A fitting reply, therefore, was given by the Lord to one who so foolishly denied committing the crime: 'The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground.'³ This means: 'why are you ignorant of your brother's whereabouts? You were alone with him along with your parents. Among so few people, the presence of your brother should not have escaped your notice. Or are you relying on the fact that your parents are unable to play the part of accuser? I am unwilling to concede that a relationship founded on protection should become based on hazard and that in your case alone nature should revoke her laws. Do you think, then, that your crime would pass unnoticed just because your parents feel it their duty not to accuse you? Rather, you

² Cf. 1 Cor. 3.11,12.

³ Gen. 4.10.

should be condemned all the more severely for taking that stand. Granted that those dear relatives of yours ought not to accuse you or even think of slaying you. But if you do not recognize Me as a witness of the act, there still is the voice of your brother's blood which cries out to Me to bear witness. That voice carries more conviction that if your brother was still living. You were alone. Who else could have slain him? If you accuse your parents, you charge them with the crime of parricide. The person who has no mercy on his parents is capable of killing his own brother. A person who proposes to show that his parents are parricides could well be a parricide himself. It was well said that "the voice of blood cries out," not "the voice of your brother." In the very throes of death your brother preserves his innocence and his brotherly devotion. Your brother does not bring an accusation, lest it should appear to be one of parricide. It is not his voice that accuses nor is it his mind. Rather, is it the voice of that very blood which you shed. Your brother, therefore, is not your accuser. Your accuser is your own deed of wickedness.' At this point the accused person is unable to defend himself, because one who admits that he is guilty cannot rely on the evidence of witnesses. The deed speaks for itself. Moreover, the earth which received the blood also stands as a witness of the deed.

(30) It was well said: 'The voice of your brother's blood cries from the ground.' He did not say 'cries from your brother's body,' but 'cries from the earth.' Although his brother refrains, the earth does not. If his brother is silent, the earth condemns. The earth acts as both witness and judge against you. The earth, still wet with the blood of your slain brother, is a hostile witness. As a judge, the earth, befouled by such a crime, is even more antagonistic, inasmuch as she opened her mouth and received your brother's blood shed

by your own hand. When she opened her mouth, she expected indeed to receive words of brotherly love. She had no fears when she saw the two brothers. She was aware that the relation of consanguinity was an incentive to love, not to hate. How could the earth have a suspicion of parricide, when she had not yet seen a homicide? But you shed blood for which the earth in retaliation 'will not give her fruit to you.'⁴ How guileless was that act of revenge! She who was so seriously outraged limited herself to the act of withholding. She refrained from inflicting injury.

(31) No mean doctrine is expressed in the words, 'The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me.'⁵ God gives ear to the just even in death, since they live unto God. And rightly are they considered to be alive, because, even if they have tasted the death of the body, they still enjoy a bodiless life and are illuminated with the splendor of their merits and are basking in light eternal.⁶ God beholds, therefore, the blood of the just. He turns aside from the prayers of the impious, since, even if they appear to be alive, they are more miserable than all of the dead. They surround themselves with flesh as with a sepulcher in which they have entombed their unhappy souls. What other comparison can be made? The soul is shrouded in earth and is bound by the inordinate desires of avarice and of other vices, so that it cannot breathe the air of heavenly grace. A sinner of this sort has been cursed by earth, which is the lowest and meanest constituent in this world of ours. The higher parts are, of course, the heavens and what exists in heaven, the sun, the moon, the stars, Thrones, Dominations, Principalities and Powers,⁷ Cherubim and Seraphim. There is no doubt, there-

4 Gen. 4.12.

5 Gen. 4.10.

6 Cf. Rom. 6.10-13.

7 Cf. Col. 1.16.

fore, that the person condemned by the inferior parts of the world is condemned, too, by the superior. How can Cain, when he is not absolved by the earth, be absolved by the righteous decisions made there above? Hence he is commanded to be 'a fugitive on the earth, groaning and trembling.'⁸

(32) There is no disputing the fact that the wicked are confronted with evil and always will be. Present evils cause sadness; future evils, dread; but the wicked are more perturbed by present evils than by those in the future. Wherefore Cain said the Lord: 'My punishment is too great to bear. If you abandon me today, I shall hide myself from your face.'⁹ There is nothing more grievous than to be a wanderer and to be irrevocably bereft of God. With a sinner's death there comes an end of sinning, whereas his life, deprived of God, his Pilot, suffers shipwreck and disaster. If the shepherd abandons his flock, the wild beasts make their inroads. In like manner, when God deserts man, the Devil makes his entrance. To be deprived of a guide is a matter of serious consequence for the foolish. When no physician is at hand, there is occasion for diseases to creep in and inflict more injury. The man who desires to hide his faults and cover up his sins goes into concealment. The man who does wrong hates the light of day and waits for darkness to serve his iniquities. The just man, however, is apt not to conceal himself from his Lord and God. Rather, he desires to offer himself to God, saying: 'Behold, I am here as one whose conscience is clear and who fears no detection.'

(33) With reason, therefore, does the man who is conscious of evil hide himself and say: 'Whoever finds me will kill me.'¹⁰ The man of limited vision is afraid when death has

⁸ Gen. 4.12.

⁹ Gen. 4.13.

¹⁰ Gen. 4.14.

come upon him. He pays no heed to the continuous presence of death. The judgment of God is ignored and his sole concern is his body's decease. But from what source did he fear death whose parents were the only living beings on earth? There was the possibility that one who broke the ordinances of the Law of God could have had fears of an attack from wild beasts. A person who taught man how to kill could not have assumptions regarding the rest of the animal kingdom. A person who showed how the crime of parricide could be committed might well fear a parricidal act on the part of his own parents. The parents could learn that lesson from their son which later generations learned from their parents.

(34) Now let us consider the reason for God's statement, 'Whoever kills Cain shall be punished sevenfold,'¹¹ and why a token was placed upon him so that no one should kill him, a parricide. A provision was made to protect a person against the slaying of an innocent man. Besides the five bodily senses, man has the power of speech and the ability to propagate. He also has an eighth power, the power of reason.¹² The other powers are subject to death unless they are subject to the control of reason. Wherefore, the man who is without reason in exercising these faculties incurs danger to himself. A loss of reason, therefore, bring with it an ineffectual use of these seven bodily gifts. They have no efficacy without the saving bonds of reason. The number seven of which we speak has better uses. It conveys ideas of rest and remission.¹³ The person, therefore, who has not spared the life of a sinner has begrudged him the opportunity for the remission of his sins and at the same time deprived him of all hopes of remission.

¹¹ Gen. 4.15.

¹² Cf. St. Ambrose, Letter to Horontianus, in *Letters*, trans. Sister Mary Beyenka. O. P., Fathers of the Church 26 (New York 1954) 264-265.

¹³ Cf. Gen. 2.3.

He will, in fact, be subject in equal measure to divine justice.

(35) As regards the token God placed on Cain with the purpose of protecting him from death at the hands of another, this may be said. He wanted the wanderer to have time for reflection and by such kindness inspire him to change his ways. It generally happens that we entrust ourselves more readily to those persons to whom we are indebted. The favor granted to him was not great. Yet it was enough to scotch the foolish actions of a stupid man. This man, although liable to eternal punishment, did not demand that the punishment be remitted. He believed that he should plead for his life on this earth where there is more anxiety than pleasure. Death consists in the severance of the body from the soul and is at the same time the termination of our life here. With the coming of death, man's bodily sufferings are ready to cease, not to increase. The fears, in fact, which frequently haunt us in this present life—the griefs, pains, lamentations, and tortures of varied sort, the mutilations provoked by exposure to illness and disease—all these for mankind are more often the equivalent of death. Death under such circumstances truly appears to be a mercy, not a penalty which has the character of finality. By a sentence such as this our life is not taken away. We experience a life that is far better. When the wicked who are unwilling to quit the paths of sin leave this life, they reach, without their knowing it, not a goal set by nature, but a terminus for their wrongdoing. Those men who are indentured to sin are thus prevented from doing other deeds of wickedness. If, again, men are seen to have fulfilled life's expectations, they are believed to have migrated to another world and not to have foundered here below.

(36) This is an opportune time to discuss the question of the spirituality of the soul. Truly happy is that life when

every man who is conscious of having lived well has cast aside the trapping of his flesh and has freed himself from this prison of the body.¹⁴ Then we are free to fly to that place above, where our souls once groaned in the act of commingling with the bodily passions of this flesh of ours. Our souls were destined there to complete the task appointed by our Pilot, namely, by the use of reason to bring under subjection the irrational emotions of our bodies. This is why the Prophets were late in accompanying the Jewish people into captivity. Otherwise, the rest of the people would have been deprived of the guidance and counsel of holy men and would thus have undergone more serious calamities. With their presence the people would be likely to be stirred on hearing words of encouragement and thus be induced to pay homage to the Lord, their God. The people, overwhelmed by the adversities of captivity, could thus avoid the sin of perfidy and not despair of their eternal salvation.

(37) At this point it is opportune to refute the arguments of those who believe that this life here is the only one—a life subject to calamity and to grief. Our refutation rests on a simple alignment of facts. We have in Cain and Abel two contrasting characters. One was just, innocent and loyal. Because of the acceptability of his offerings to God he incurred the hatred of his brother and, while still a youth, become a victim of the sin of parricide. The other brother was unjust, evil, and disloyal. Polluted even with a brother's blood, he lived to a ripe old age, married, left a family and founded cities—all this under the providence of God. Is not this a clear case for divine intervention? You are wrong in assuming that we have here an example of a life of pleasure. You do not take into account a prolonged old age, steeped in misery—an old age that experienced those anxieties that time inevitably

14 Cf. Cicero, *De republica* 6.14.

brings in its wake. Add to this the fact that we are subject to disasters every moment of our lives. Surrounded by monsters like Scylla, are we not continually exposed to the poundings of a thunderous sea and compelled to dwell as best we can in habitations of sheer rock in the manner of that monstrous animal—a monster, not merely of immemorial time, but of immemorial wickedness?¹⁵ Hence, Cain's old age is not to be considered as something desirable. It was, rather, an occasion for punishment, inasmuch as he lived in the midst of fears and spent his extended period of time in fruitless labors. There is no penalty more grievous than that which conscious guilt imposes. Behold, then, the perpetuity of life which the just enjoy—an enjoyment in which the wicked have no share! The blood of the just man who has suffered death cries out to God, whereas the sinner's life is like that of a fugitive from justice.¹⁶

(38) Once the crime is admitted at the very inception of this sinful act of parricide, then the divine Law of God's mercy should be immediately extended. If punishment is forthwith inflicted on the accused, then men in the exercise of justice would in no way observe patience and moderation, but would straightway condemn the defendant to punishment. God in His providence gives this sort of verdict so that magistrates might learn the virtues of magnanimity and patience, that they may not be unduly hasty in their eagerness to punish or, because of immature deliberation, condemn a man in his innocence. This would serve as a precedent not to impose a harsh penalty on some troublesome defendant and at the same time not permit a person to go unpunished who has shown no indications that he is sorry for his crime. God drove Cain out of His presence¹⁷ and sent him into

¹⁵ Scylla betrayed her own father.

¹⁶ Cf. Gen. 4.10-12.

¹⁷ Cf. Gen. 4.16.

exile far away from his native land, so that he passed from a life of human kindness to one which was more akin to the rude existence of a wild beast. God, who preferred the correction rather than the death of a sinner,¹⁸ did not desire that a homicide be punished by the exaction of another act of homicide. Wherefore, punishment is meted out seventy times sevenfold on Lamech,¹⁹ because a person who does not reform even after a conviction has taken place commits a more serious fault. Cain had sinned at a time previous to Lamech's crime. Lamech surely should have taken precautions to avoid what he notes as reprehensible in another person. Lamech's statement was in accordance with the decree of his Judge that no one should on any occasion consider it right to strike a guilty man. From the point of view of our faith, no one ought to slay a person who in the course of nature still would have time for repentance up to the very moment of his death. A guilty man—provided a premature punishment had not deprived him of life—could well procure forgiveness by redeeming himself by an act of repentance, however belated.

¹⁸ Cf. Ezech. 33.11.

¹⁹ Cf. Gen. 4.24.; 'Sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for Cain.'